

Weight Stigma at Home

A Guide for Parents and
Caregivers



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01

Introduction

Purpose of this workbook

Children begin forming ideas about bodies, weight, and health at a very young age. By the time they reach elementary school, many already hold strong opinions about what kinds of bodies are “good” or “bad.” These beliefs don’t just come from peers or media – they often start at home. Parents, caregivers, and family members are some of the most powerful role models in shaping how kids see themselves and others. In a culture where dieting and “watching your weight” are normalized, parents often find themselves fighting an uphill battle to model body acceptance and promote health without shame.

This booklet is designed to help families recognize and prevent weight stigma in everyday life. Weight stigma – bias, stereotypes, or unfair treatment based on body size – can deeply affect children’s mental, physical, and social well-being. But with awareness and small changes in language, habits, and household environment, parents can raise body-confident kids who feel worthy, respected, and healthy – at every size. By addressing weight stigma proactively, caregivers can foster a home environment where children feel safe, supported, and valued for who they are – not their size.

Our goals for this booklet include:

- **Increase Awareness:** Help caregivers understand what weight stigma is, including both overt (explicit) and subtle (implicit) forms.
- **Highlight Impact:** Show how weight stigma affects children’s and teens’ mental, physical, and social well-being.
- **Identify Contexts:** Explore where weight stigma shows up at home, in schools, during extracurricular activities, and in media exposure.
- **Promote Empathy and Inclusivity:** Encourage respectful attitudes and behaviors toward children and adults of all body sizes.
- **Support Positive Change:** Provide practical strategies for modeling body respect, supporting healthy behaviors, and creating a stigma-free home environment.

Why Weight Stigma Matters for Families

Weight stigma is a widespread mindset that can have lasting negative effects on children and families. These effects are seen across mental health, physical health, social development, and daily behaviors:

- **Mental and Emotional Health:** Children exposed to weight stigma – whether directly or indirectly – may experience low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction. Caregivers’ comments about weight, diet, or appearance can unintentionally reinforce these feelings.
- **Physical Health:** Fear of judgment or embarrassment can lead children to resist healthcare visits, skip meals, or develop unhealthy relationships with food and movement.
- **Reinforcing Stereotypes:** Weight stigma teaches children that worth and health are determined by size, ignoring genetics, environment, and overall well-being.
- **Equity and Inclusion:** Addressing weight stigma at home helps children learn respect for themselves and others, fostering an inclusive mindset that can counter bias they encounter at school or in media.
- **Hidden Messages:** Even well-intentioned families may unknowingly transmit stigma through comments, jokes, or household practices, making it critical to reflect on everyday language and behaviors.

By understanding these impacts, parents and caregivers can take meaningful steps to support children’s confidence, health, and self-worth.

Who this booklet is for

This booklet is for parents, guardians, foster families, and any caregiver who wants to nurture body confidence and resilience in children.

- **At Home:** Children notice what adults say about their own bodies, about siblings, or about others. Words and behaviors at home shape children’s beliefs about what is normal or desirable.
- **At School and Activities:** Weight-based teasing, comparisons, or exclusion from peers can affect children’s social confidence. Caregivers play a key role in reinforcing messages of respect and inclusion.
- **In Media and Society:** Exposure to narrow beauty standards, diet culture, or weight-focused messages can influence children’s self-image. Caregivers can help interpret and counter these messages.

This booklet equips caregivers with the understanding, examples, and practical strategies needed to model body respect, promote healthy behaviors, and prevent weight stigma from taking root in children’s lives.

02

What is Weight Stigma?

Definition

Weight stigma refers to the negative judgments, assumptions, and unfair treatment that people experience because of their body size. These attitudes are harmful and can influence children from an early age – especially when reinforced at home, school, or in media.

As caregivers, it is important to understand that weight stigma can appear in both obvious and subtle ways:

- **Obvious Weight Stigma:** These are direct, clear messages or actions. For example, a parent criticizing a child's eating habits, making jokes about another person's weight, or openly saying a child "needs to lose weight" are obvious forms of weight stigma. These messages are easy to recognize but can have long-lasting emotional effects.
- **Subtle Weight Stigma:** These are indirect or hidden messages that children may notice even if no one intends harm. For instance, a parent repeatedly comparing themselves to thinner peers, praising weight loss as an accomplishment, or labeling foods as "good" or "bad" sends subtle cues that reinforce stigma. Subtle messages can be harder to notice but are just as impactful over time.

Both obvious and subtle weight stigma shape children's beliefs about themselves and others. By recognizing these patterns, caregivers can actively create a home environment that values health, effort, and self-worth over size or appearance.

When children are exposed to weight stigma, they learn to associate certain bodies with shame and others with worth. Over time, they may turn those attitudes inward, leading to harmful self-criticism.



03

Why Parents and Caregivers Play a Key Role



Introduction

From a young age, kids are watching, listening, and absorbing how adults talk about food, weight, and appearance. If they hear frequent complaints about dieting, “feeling fat,” or disliking one’s own body, children may learn to see their own bodies in the same critical way .

- **Modeling**: Children notice and mimic caregivers’ behaviors. If kids see adults criticizing their own bodies, dieting excessively, or avoiding certain foods, they may internalize the idea that weight is something to fear, control, or judge.
- **Environment**: Homes that emphasize acceptance, balance, and respect for all body types help protect children from harmful messages they encounter elsewhere. A positive home environment teaches kids that health and self-worth are about caring for their bodies – not achieving a certain size.
- **Buffering**: Even when children face weight stigma at school, in sports, or online, a supportive home can give them resilience. Feeling valued, supported, and understood helps kids cope with external pressures and reduces the risk of internalizing negative messages.

When parents actively model body respect – enjoying food without guilt, celebrating what bodies can do, and avoiding negative comments about appearance – children are more likely to develop a healthy self-image. A supportive home environment acts as a protective buffer against the harmful effects of weight stigma that children are likely to encounter in the wider world.

04

Examples of Weight Stigma in Home Environments

Introduction

Weight stigma can appear in subtle and obvious ways within the home. Children are highly observant—they notice comments, behaviors, and even the way the home environment is arranged. Recognizing these patterns is the first step to creating a supportive, stigma-free space.

Below are common ways weight stigma may show up in educational settings:

Criticizing Bodies

(Your Own, Your Child's, or Others')

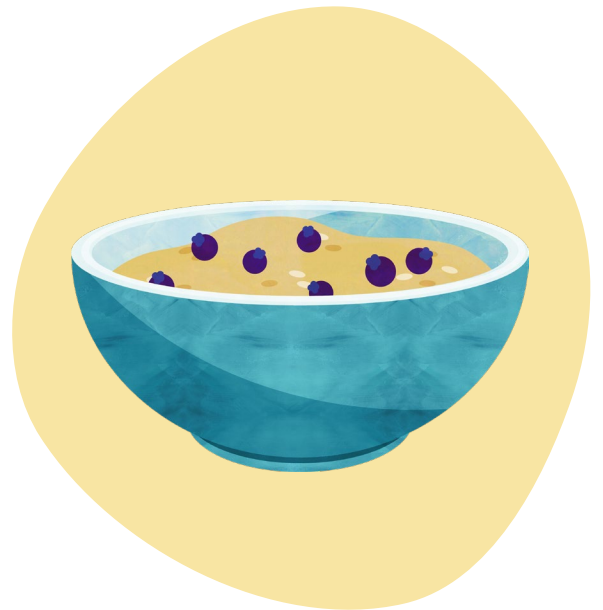
Comments like “I feel so fat today” or “You’d be prettier if you lost weight” can unintentionally teach children to value appearance over health or worth. Even joking remarks about weight can stick in a child’s mind, shaping their self-esteem and body image.

Restricting Food or Dieting

Placing children on diets, labeling certain foods as “bad,” or rewarding/punishing with food sends the message that food is a measure of morality or control. Children may learn to associate eating with shame, guilt, or secrecy.

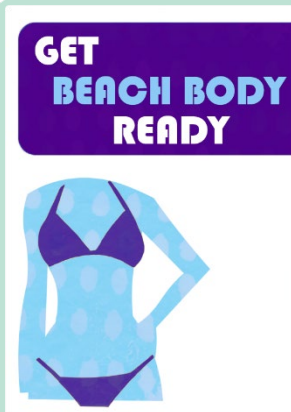
Comparing Siblings or Peers

Saying “Why can’t you look more like your sister?” or “Your friend is so skinny” encourages children to judge themselves against others. This fosters body dissatisfaction and competition based on appearance rather than character, effort, or kindness.



Jokes or Media Comments About Others' Bodies

Even if adults are laughing along with TV shows, memes, or online videos that mock weight, children internalize these messages. This reinforces harmful stereotypes and normalizes disrespect toward certain body types.

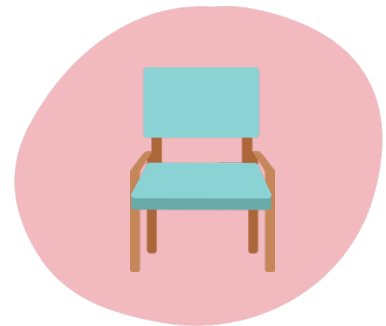


Overemphasis on Clothing Sizes or Appearance

Frequent comments like “That dress will make you look slimmer” or constantly focusing on what children should wear to hide or alter their body shape can signal that value is tied to size, not comfort or personal expression.

Environment and Accessibility

Furniture, clothing, or equipment that doesn't accommodate all body sizes may unintentionally communicate that certain bodies are less welcome. This can make children feel excluded or judged, even without words.



Using weight-stigmatizing language or engaging in weight-stigmatizing behaviors affects children when they internalize these messages. Internalization refers to the process of assimilating the beliefs and attitudes of others as one's own, even unconsciously. By noticing and adjusting these behaviors and environmental cues, parents and caregivers can create a home where all children feel respected, safe, and free from judgment. Simple changes in language, modeling, and home setup can have a lasting impact on a child's self-esteem and relationship with their body.

05

How Weight Stigma Affects Children and Teens

Introduction

Weight stigma doesn't just hurt feelings – it can affect children's mental health, physical well-being, social life, and long-term habits. Internalized weight bias (IWB) is the process by which individuals absorb and accept negative societal attitudes and stereotypes about weight, leading them to judge themselves harshly based on their body size. Studies show that IWB is associated with many negative outcomes such as physical inactivity, lower self-esteem, sleep disturbance, stress, and disordered eating behaviors. Understanding these impacts of weight stigma and IWB helps parents respond with empathy, support, and practical strategies.

Biological Impacts

Stigma can affect health indirectly. Children who feel judged about their weight may avoid physical activity, fearing teasing in gyms or sports. Some may engage in unhealthy eating behaviors – such as skipping meals, restrictive dieting, or overeating in secret – as a coping mechanism. Fear of judgment can also make children reluctant to visit doctors, which can delay care and reduce overall well-being.

Psychological Impacts

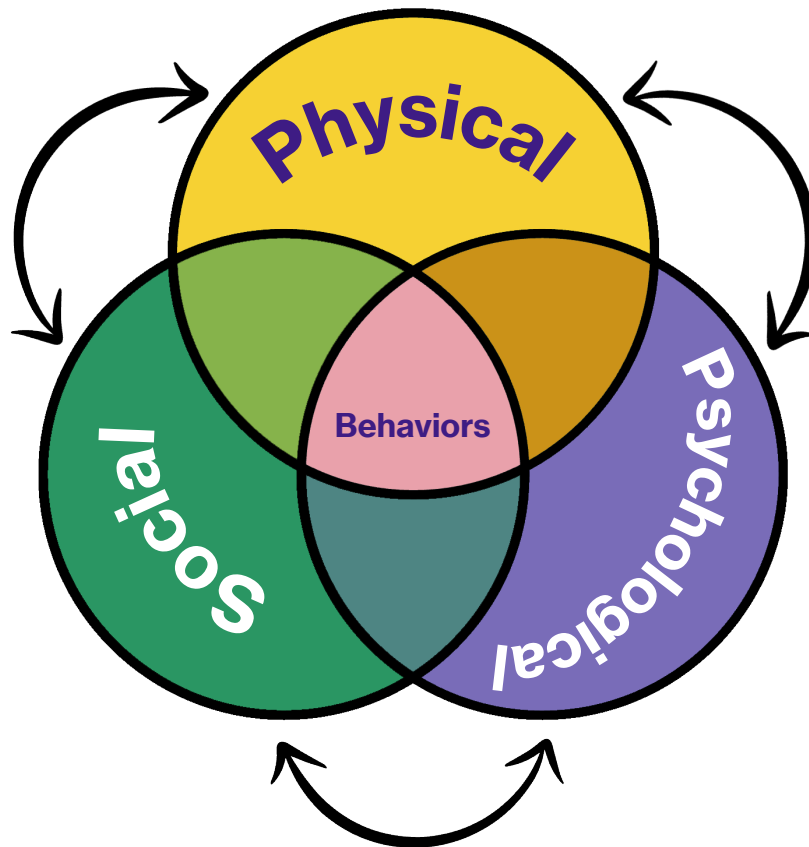
Children who experience or witness weight stigma are more likely to struggle with low self-esteem, anxiety, or depression. They may internalize negative messages about their bodies, leading to persistent self-criticism or shame. Even casual comments about dieting, weight, or appearance can stick with a child, shaping how they see themselves well into adolescence and adulthood.

Social Impacts

Weight stigma can impact friendships, school participation, and confidence. Children may withdraw from social situations, avoid group activities, or be targeted by peers for teasing or exclusion. These experiences can lead to isolation, loneliness, and reduced opportunities to build social skills.

Long-Term Impacts

Early experiences of stigma often carry into adulthood. Chronic dieting, ongoing body dissatisfaction, and negative self-talk can persist, influencing lifelong habits and health behaviors. Experiencing stigma at home, school, or in media can also shape expectations about how others will treat them, leading to mistrust or heightened self-consciousness in social and professional settings.



Resilience Through Support

The good news is that a supportive home environment can buffer these effects. When parents model body respect, encourage enjoyable physical activity, and focus on health rather than appearance, children develop tools to cope with stigma. Open conversations, empathetic listening, and celebrating what bodies can do – rather than how they look – help children build confidence and self-worth that withstands outside pressures.

06

Common Myths About Weight and Health

Introduction

Parents and caregivers often hear well-meaning advice about weight and health, but many of these messages are based on myths rather than evidence. Believing these myths- and verbalizing, endorsing, or enforcing them in the home- can unintentionally contribute to shame, dieting behaviors, or negative body image in children. Understanding the facts helps families focus on habits and well-being rather than appearance.

Myth 1: A child's weight always indicates their health

Reality: Weight is just one part of health. Children can be healthy at a wide range of sizes, and factors like nutrition, sleep, activity, mental health, and genetics are more important indicators of well-being. Healthy behaviors should be encouraged among all children, regardless of weight, shape, or size.

Parent tip: Regardless of your child's body size, focus conversations on behaviors ("Let's try new vegetables tonight" or "How did you feel after soccer practice?") rather than size or numbers on a scale.

Myth 2: Talking about weight motivates healthy changes

Reality: Frequent weight talk or comparisons can lead children to internalize shame and develop unhealthy habits, like skipping meals, restrictive dieting, or hiding food.

Parent tip: Avoid comments like "You should lose weight" or "I feel fat today." Instead, model positive language about your own body and talk about health as a whole picture.

Myth 3: Restrictive diets are an appropriate intervention for children and adults with higher weight

Reality: Restriction often increases preoccupation with food and may lead to overeating, secret eating, or negative feelings about food. Children need balanced, predictable access to a variety of foods to develop healthy relationships with eating.

Parent tip: Offer a variety of foods without labeling them “good” or “bad.” Encourage children to listen to hunger and fullness cues and enjoy meals together as a positive experience.

Myth 4: Small bodies equals self-discipline, and larger bodies reflect laziness

Reality: Body size is influenced by genetics, metabolism, environment, stress, and a wide variety of life circumstances. Judging character or effort based on size is inaccurate and harmful.

Parent tip: Emphasize effort, persistence, and kindness – qualities unrelated to body size – when praising children or modeling behavior.

Why addressing myths matters

When parents recognize and challenge these myths, they help children feel valued and safe in their bodies. Children learn that health is about balance, enjoyment, and self-care, not numbers on a scale or comparison to others.



07

How to Prevent Weight Stigma at Home

Introduction

Creating a home environment that promotes body respect and health for children starts with the actions and words of caregivers. By focusing on behaviors, modeling self-compassion, and reducing weight-focused messaging, parents can help children develop a positive relationship with their bodies.

Avoid negative comments about anyone's body, including your own

- Children are always listening. Comments like “I hate my thighs” or “I need to lose weight” can teach kids to be critical of themselves.
- Instead, model appreciation for your body's abilities: “I'm glad my legs carried me through that hike today!”



Focus on behaviors, not size

- Encourage regular physical activity for fun and energy, not weight control.
- Talk about balanced meals, hydration, and sleep as ways to feel good, rather than to “look good.”
- Celebrate effort and consistency over outcomes.

Teach that bodies come in all shapes and sizes

- Use inclusive language when discussing friends, family, or characters in media.
- Highlight diverse body types in books, shows, and toys.

Offer balanced meals without labeling foods as “good” or “bad”

- Encourage children to enjoy a variety of foods and trust their own hunger cues.
- Avoid using food as punishment or reward.

Reflect on your own relationship with your body

- Notice when you feel frustrated or critical about your appearance. Ask yourself if it's really about your body or something else (stress, clothing fit, social anxiety).
- Model self-compassion: "I'm frustrated this dress doesn't fit, but I appreciate that my body is strong and healthy."

Use neutral language around size

- Instead of "overweight" or "fat," use terms like "larger body" or "higher weight" if needed for conversation.
- Focus on function and health rather than appearance.

Be mindful of mirrors, scales, and clothing

- Avoid making weight the center of attention in the home.
- Remind children that clothes should fit and be comfortable, not force bodies into a certain standard.

Reflection Prompt

- Do I often make negative comments about my body in front of my child?
- When I feel frustrated with my body, am I really upset about something else, like stress at work or anxiety about an event?
- How can I show appreciation for my body without apology?

Support resilience against outside stigma

- Discuss media messages and peer comments critically: "Ads often show only thin bodies. That's not all that exists or is healthy."
- Encourage children to value their abilities, interests, and personal qualities above appearance.

Why this matters:

Homes that model respect, balance, and self-compassion help children resist harmful weight-based messages elsewhere. Caregivers are the first line of protection against weight stigma, teaching children to value themselves for who they are, not the number on a scale or the shape of their body.

08

Fostering Body Respect and Positive Self-Image

Parents and caregivers have a unique opportunity to help children feel confident and comfortable in their own bodies. Building body respect early can protect against internalizing harmful messages from peers, media, or society.

- **Celebrate what bodies can do, not just how they look**
 - Highlight abilities: “Your legs helped you run so fast today!” or “You climbed that hill with strength.”
 - Encourage activities that emphasize skill, fun, and enjoyment rather than appearance.
- **Avoid labeling children by size or weight**
 - Phrases like “You’re looking chunky” or “You need to slim down” can be harmful and stick in a child’s mind.
 - Focus on health, energy, and self-care instead: “Eating these fruits and vegetables gives you energy to play soccer.”
- **Encourage self-expression and personal choice**
 - Let children choose clothes that feel comfortable and reflect their personality.
 - Support their interests and hobbies without linking success or enjoyment to appearance.
- **Promote media literacy**
 - Discuss how advertising, TV, and social media often show unrealistic body types.
 - Ask questions like: “Do you think all models look like this in real life?”
 - Encourage children to follow accounts or watch shows that show diverse bodies and abilities.
- **Encourage self-compassion and positive self-talk**
 - Model kind language about your own body: “I’m grateful my arms are strong.”
 - Teach children to replace self-critical thoughts with neutral or positive ones.
- **Provide emotional support when children face stigma**
 - Listen without judgment if your child experiences teasing or hurtful comments.
 - Validate their feelings and discuss strategies for coping, like talking to a trusted adult or using affirmations.

Why this matters:

Children internalize messages from the adults around them. By modeling self-respect, celebrating abilities, and fostering media literacy, caregivers can help children develop a healthy self-image that lasts a lifetime.

09

Talking to Kids about Bodies, Food, and Health

Conversations about health can be tricky, but they don't have to be. Using age - appropriate, body-positive language can make a world of difference. Instead of telling a child “that food isn't healthy,” caregivers might explain, “our bodies need many different foods to grow strong.”

Encourage children to tune in to their hunger and fullness cues and remind them that one meal or one day doesn't define healthy eating. If children ask about bodies or weight, be honest but gentle, emphasizing that bodies come in all shapes and sizes—and all deserve respect.

Parents can also prepare kids for the outside world by helping them think critically about media messages or peer comments. Kids who know that advertising often promotes unrealistic body ideals are better equipped to resist harmful comparisons.

- **Use age-appropriate, body -positive language** . Keep it simple with young kids (“All bodies are good bodies”) and expand with teens.
- **Keep food talk positive** . Avoid fear-based comments like “that food isn't healthy.” Instead, focus on balance and variety.
- **Support autonomy** . Teach kids to listen to hunger and fullness cues.
- **Stress patterns, not perfection** . No single food makes or breaks health. Habits over time are what matter.
- **Answer questions gently** . Be honest if your child asks about weight but avoid framing size as a problem.
- **Prepare them for outside messages** . Talk openly about how media and peers may spread harmful ideas and help them build resilience.
- **Emphasize respect** . Teach that all bodies deserve dignity and kindness, regardless of size.

10

Resources for Families

Continuing Education and Resources

Books

- Fat Talk: Parenting in the Age of Diet Culture by Virginia Sole-Smith
- Intuitive Eating: A Revolutionary Diet Approach by Evelyn Tribole & Elyse Resch
- Decolonizing Wellness: A QTBIPOC-Centered Guide to Escape the Diet Trap, Heal Your Self-Image, and Achieve Body Liberation by Dalia Kinsey
- What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat by Aubrey Gordon
- Your Body is Not an Apology by Sonya Renee Taylor
- You Have the Right to Remain Fat by Virgie Tovar
- Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia by Sabrina Strings

Podcasts

- What is Weight Stigma? With Dr. Rebecca Puhl
- The Language of Weight Stigma (with Ragen Chastain)
- Rebel Eaters Club Podcast hosted by Virgie Tovar
- Fierce Fatty Podcast hosted by Vinny Welsby (they/them)
- Maintenance Phase hosted by Aubrey Gordon and Michael Hobbes

Documentaries

- Embodied
- Your Fat Friend

Organizations

- UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health
- Association for Size Diversity and Health
- National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance
- Obesity Medicine Association
- The Obesity Society
- Obesity Action Coalition

Support groups and online communities

- Fat Fridays Virtual Social Club
- ASDAH Events
- I Weigh Community
- Weight and Healthcare Newsletter by Ragen Chastain

For educators and healthcare professionals

- Healthcare professionals:
 - Massachusetts Medical Society – Weight Bias Resources
- Educators:
 - Weight Bias and Stigma in Schools (PDF)

11

Final Thoughts

feeling good
through
movement



Summary of key takeaways

Every parent wants their child to grow up healthy, confident, and happy. Creating a stigma-free home is one of the most powerful ways to make that possible. Kids who feel respected and accepted in their families are better equipped to navigate a world that often sends harmful messages about weight and worth.

Key takeaways:

- Focus on abilities, health, and function over appearance.
- Model body respect and avoid negative self-talk.
- Encourage positive coping, media literacy, and inclusive attitudes.
- Provide emotional support and celebrate diversity.

Remember: small shifts matter. Changing a comment here, modeling compassion there – these add up to a lifetime of self-respect for your child.

Start by reflecting on your own beliefs, making gentle adjustments, and leading with love. Together, we can raise a generation that knows the truth: all bodies are good bodies.



Thank You

At Greaux Healthy, we are committed to fostering a culture of respect, inclusion, and evidence-based understanding around health and well-being. This booklet is designed to support our shared mission of promoting health equity and reducing weight stigma in our communities.

We encourage you to use this resource as a guide to better understand how weight stigma affects individuals across all ages and backgrounds. Whether you're a healthcare provider, educator, parent, or community member, your role in creating inclusive environments matters.

If you have questions or would like to learn more about our outreach efforts, please connect with the Greaux Healthy team. Together, we can build a healthier, more compassionate Louisiana – where everybody is valued.

Thank you for being part of this important work!

– The Greaux Healthy Team at Pennington Biomedical Research Center

Contact Information

Phone 225-763-2500

Website www.greauxhealthy.org

Social Media



Address

6400 Perkins Road
Baton Rouge, LA 70808