

# Study: Teasing about weight can affect pre-teens profoundly

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Schoolyard taunts of any type can potentially damage a child's sense of self-confidence. But a new study suggests that a particular kind of teasing - about weight - can have distinctive and significant effects on how pre-teens perceive their own bodies.

The research, among the first to specifically examine the impact of weight-based [criticism](#) on pre-adolescents, also hints that the practice can cause other health and emotional issues for its victims.

"We tend to think of adolescence as the time when kids become sensitive about their [body image](#), but our findings suggest that the seeds of [body dissatisfaction](#) are actually being sown much earlier," said Timothy D. Nelson, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the study's lead author. "Criticism of weight, in particular, can contribute to issues that go beyond general problems with self-esteem."

For the study, Nelson and his colleagues surveyed hundreds of public school students whose average age was 10.8 years. They collected participants' heights and weights and calculated their [Body Mass Index](#), then examined the relationships between weight-related criticism and children's perceptions of themselves.

Their results showed that overweight pre-teens who endured weight-based criticism tended to judge their bodies more harshly and were less satisfied with their body sizes than students who weren't teased about

their weight.

The effects of weight-based teasing were significant even when researchers removed the effects of students' BMI from their analysis in an attempt to separate the relative contributions of physical reality and children's social interactions to their body perceptions, Nelson said.

Because children who develop such negative views of their bodies are at higher risk for internalizing problems, developing irregular eating behaviors and ongoing victimization, researchers said these results should be a signal for more early identification and intervention efforts at schools.

"In a way, weight-related criticism is one of the last socially acceptable forms of criticism," Nelson said. "There's often a sense that overweight people 'deserve' it, or that if they are continually prodded about their weight, they'll do something about it.

"In fact, our research suggests that this kind of criticism tends to increase the victim's body dissatisfaction, which has been shown to be a factor in poorer outcomes with pediatric weight management programs. It becomes something of a vicious cycle."

The study notes that children's views of their bodies are a complex interaction between physical reality and socially influenced perceptions. Peer criticism about weight is an important social factor that could affect how pre-adolescents interpret the physical reality of their bodies, Nelson said.

The findings, Nelson said, should be relevant to understanding the consequences of weight-related criticism and considering interventions with preadolescents who are frequent targets of the taunts.

"While weight-related criticism is identifiable, programs targeting it are limited," he said. "Early identification of children who are targets of frequent and chronic weight-based criticism may also be important in reducing it and its harmful effects."

**More information:** Nelson authored the study, which appears in the *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, with Chad D. Jensen and Ric G. Steele of the Clinical Child Psychology Program at the University of Kansas.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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