

# Adding heft to anti-bullying campaigns

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

While high-profile cases of bullying have spurred a national dialogue in schools and communities in recent years, one of the most common forms of bullying is rarely discussed, let alone addressed, according to a UConn researcher who is working to draw attention to this important social issue.

Rebecca Puhl is focused on developing policy strategies to help children

who are bullied because of their weight.

"Most often anti-[bullying](#) efforts target youth who are bullied because of their sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity. These are all very important issues, but weight-based bullying is also highly prevalent in the school setting and yet it rarely addressed in anti-bullying interventions," said Puhl, deputy director and senior research scientist at the Rudd Center and senior research scientist at UConn's Center for Health, Intervention, and Prevention (CHIP). Puhl is joining UConn's Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

"There's a real need ensure that weight-based bullying is on the radar and to ensure that it is addressed on par with other forms of bullying."

Legal recourse through anti-bullying laws doesn't necessarily provide adequate protections for youth who are bullied about their weight. Although 49 states currently have anti-bullying laws, only three state laws include [body weight](#) as a characteristic that places youth at risk for bullying and harassment. More comprehensive legislation is needed to ensure that this form of bullying is adequately addressed, Puhl said.

Puhl's research has found considerable public support for efforts to strengthen existing anti-bullying laws to include body weight. "There are some important opportunities for policy level changes to try to strengthen existing laws to better protect these vulnerable students," she said.

The consequences of weight-based bullying extend beyond social isolation and emotional distress. The data are quite clear: stigmatizing or bullying youth about their weight contributes to adverse health behaviors that only add to the problem of childhood obesity, which currently is one of the top two child health concerns nationally.

Despite all that's known about how damaging weight-based bullying can be, few studies have established effective solutions that can be implemented in schools, online chat rooms, and on playgrounds where weight-based bullying often takes place, she said.

Part of Puhl's mission is to recast the problem of childhood obesity and bullying as a public health issue, one that demands responses from multiple institutions – to address both symptoms and prevention.

Further, schools and parents need to increase public awareness, support advocacy efforts and inform policy makers about weight-based bullying and the need for greater protection of youth who are vulnerable to this form of bullying.

"While we're still gaining scientific understanding of the depth of the health and behavioral [health](#) consequences of bullying behavior," said Puhl, "we simply can no longer afford to accept or tolerate its presence in our society."

Provided by University of Connecticut

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