

# Discrimination toward overweight adolescents predictive of emotional problems

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Discrimination and bullying experienced by sixth graders who are overweight leads to increased emotional problems by the end of eighth grade, according to new research published in the *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, a journal of the Society of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology. The results suggest that to reduce the emotional problems, efforts must not only focus on children and adolescents' weight-loss, but must address the alarmingly disrespectful and exclusionary behavior by their peer group.

"The widespread misconception is that anyone who is heavy is likely to feel distressed because of their [weight](#), yet our findings suggest that demeaning peer responses to weight is the primary social factor underlying these [emotional problems](#)," said Jaana Juvonen, PhD, lead author of the study and professor of developmental psychology at University of California, Los Angeles. "These emotional issues can develop just as a teen is entering middle school, which is already a very difficult and emotional transition for many adolescents."

The study drew data from 5,128 youth from a larger, longitudinal study of 26 middle schools in California. Data on demographics and Body Mass Index (BMI) were collected at spring of sixth grade and emotional health was assessed at sixth as well as eighth grade. Students were asked about weight discrimination experiences during [seventh grade](#) to see how it affected changes in emotional health across middle school. The researchers examined the effects of BMI and weight-based [discrimination](#) in seventh grade on the eighth-grade outcomes, and also

looked at the indirect effect of sixth-grade BMI on eighth-grade emotional adjustment.

In total, about a third of youth sampled reported at least one weight-related discriminatory experience by seventh grade. Additionally, the data showed that, by eighth grade, girls reported higher levels of loneliness and somatic symptoms, such as headaches, fatigue, stomach aches, nausea, and poor appetite.

Many school-based anti-obesity programs focus on reducing the prevalence of overweight and obesity, emphasizing the importance of personal responsibility for weight management. However, the results of this study suggest that well-intentioned health programs may be contributing to the rising rates of weight stigmatization by seemingly faulting heavy youngsters.

"Despite good intentions, many health programs may nonetheless be increasing the prevalence of weight stigma, inasmuch as overweight or obese youth are blamed for their looks," said Juvonen. "Our findings suggest that that school-based programs aiming to reduce obesity should not only promote healthy behaviors, but also increase weight acceptance and body-shape diversity."

**More information:** Jaana Juvonen et al, Emotional Implications of Weight Stigma Across Middle School: The Role of Weight-Based Peer Discrimination, *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/15374416.2016.1188703](https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2016.1188703)

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