

# Eating disorders are rising: California bill would require schools to address body shaming

April 21 2023, by Maggie Angst

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As a teenager with dreams of becoming a professional dancer, Katie Kilbourn often found herself comparing her body to the ones she saw on stage. By age 16, she started engaging in disordered eating behaviors—initially restricting the food she consumed and later purging.

Through therapy and [support groups](#), Kilbourn, 31, of Sacramento, eventually found healing. But it wasn't until her eating disorders had taken over her life that she says anyone talked to her about accepting and celebrating the body she was given.

"I was well into my late teens before I started hearing people say things like 'all bodies are good bodies' or that you can be successful no matter what you look like," she said. "If someone had talked to me when I was like 12 or younger, I think it would have helped nip things in the bud."

Assemblyman Josh Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, is hoping a new bill he authored will do just that for [young girls](#) and teenagers growing up in California today. That includes his three young daughters, ages 8, 11 and 12.

"They're coming from a generation that was pushed into social media, especially in the pandemic, without having proper guardrails around its impacts on their emotional development," Lowenthal said about his daughters. "And I'm seeing the effects firsthand."

Assembly Bill 10 would require [school districts](#), county offices of education and charter schools to develop and adopt policies and resources about body shaming before the 2025–26 school year.

## **Teen eating disorders on the rise after the pandemic**

Body shaming—criticizing or commenting on the appearance of oneself or others in a way that often leads to comparison and shame—has spread alongside the explosion of [social media](#) in recent years.

Research shows that girls start to express concerns about their weight or shape as early as age 6.

Nearly 1 in 10 Americans is believed to struggle with an [eating disorder](#), which includes anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder, during their lifetime, according to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders.

But young girls and teens today seem to be at an even greater risk.

A study published in November 2022 found that eating disorders among [young adults](#) spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic. That's in addition to new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that revealed nearly 3 in 5 U.S. teen girls felt persistently sad or hopeless in 2021—double that of boys and a nearly 60% increase over the past decade.

Jessica BarthNesbitt, regional nutrition director for Eating Recovery Center, said efforts like Lowenthal's bill to increase awareness and education will be critical to reverse those trends.

"When you talk about bringing curriculum around [self-esteem](#) into schools, that really does help influence someone's view of their own body and other bodies in addition to helping to dispel some of the misinformation that may be in the media around what an ideal or normal body is for people," she said.

## **Body shaming and bullying policies inside California**

## **schools**

While many school districts have anti-bullying policies in place, Lowenthal said he believes more education is needed.

"It's not necessarily about bullying in a way that kids are trying to inflict pain," he said. "What I've found is that kids are talking about each other's bodies and comparing them, but they don't understand the impacts it may be making on their friends."

Sacramento City Unified School District has a bullying policy that states a student "shall not be harassed, intimidated, or bullied" based on a slew of characteristics, including disability; gender; race or ethnicity; religion and sexual orientation. The district's student sexual harassment policy also prohibits "graphic verbal comments about an individual's body."

Al Goldberg, a spokesperson for Sacramento City Unified School District, said the district does not comment on pending legislation.

"The goal of this bill is not to put a burden on schools," Lowenthal said. "We simply want to make sure that teachers and administrators have the resources available so they're armed to deal with it."

## **Rejecting negative body comments for next generation**

Although it's been more than a decade since Kilbourn engaged in disordered eating behaviors, she said there are still a lot of aspiring dancers who face pressure to lose weight and look a certain way.

Seeking to combat that culture, Kilbourn created a nonprofit dance company centered around inspiring body positivity and self-appreciation.

And while she's working as a dance instructor to inspire confidence in her community, she hopes a similar message can be spread more widely through schools.

"I want to give children the tools that they need to stand up for themselves and to continue fighting back against this negative culture that we live in," she said. "And if we start to have these conversations with younger students and younger children, hopefully we can have that impact on them sooner."

2023 The Sacramento Bee.

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Citation: Eating disorders are rising: California bill would require schools to address body shaming (2023, April 21) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-04-disorders-california-bill-require-schools.html>

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