



Bullying and the Obese Child

In September 2008, the University of Michigan released a study stating that,

"Bullying is a major concern among [American] parents with overweight and obese children ages 6 to 13..."

While bullying and school safety is a concern for children everywhere, kids who are overweight or obese may be more likely to be targeted by bullies.

"Bullying an overweight child is easy because there's so much in the media [showing] that being thin is better, prettier, sexier than being curvy," says Marilyn Barnicke Bellegem, M.Ed., a family therapist based in Burlington, Ontario.

Parents and older children often understand that rich, super-skinny celebrities aren't the norm in society. However, comparing oneself with friends, classmates, family members and even movie stars is common: "We do get a lot of calls from boys or girls who are being teased because of their size," says Cheryl-Lynn Roberts, a counsellor with [Kids Help Phone](#).

How can weight issues affect children and teens? It's a complicated matter of course. Sometimes children internalize this issue more than parents realize: "

There is one example where a 15-year-old girl was struggling with her weight, but didn't want to worry her parents," explains Roberts of a young woman who called into Kids Help Phone.

"She was struggling a lot, really getting depressed and trying to lose weight in an unhealthy way."

Roberts and a fellow counsellor suggested that the girl write a letter to her parents and explain her concerns and her idea to see a nutritionist. Later, the girl followed up with Kids Help Phone and shared a positive outcome: She wrote the letter to her parents and then she and her mother went to consult a nutritionist at the YMCA.

Bullying someone because they are obese is not that different than bullying a child because of his race or because she wears glasses – it's all about finding a vulnerability:

"There are always power struggles and that's how it starts off," says Roberts.

Marilyn Barnicke Belleghem concurs: "Bullies will bully, all they need is a target," she says.

"What an obese child needs to recognize is that the bully's behaviour is not all about them and that, if it wasn't that particular feature (being over-weight) the bully would find something else to taunt about."

So, what can an overweight or obese child do to conquer bullying?

- The most important thing (in all cases of bullying) is to build self-esteem and self-confidence. Generally, if a child feels secure about herself and who she is, she is less likely to be bullied in the first place.
- As a parent, you can be an active listener. Ask open-ended questions and believe your child when he says he's being bullied.
- Model healthy living: exercise or participate in sports as a family, offer healthy snack choices, make group decisions about what to eat for meals so the child feels involved and find a sport or fitness activity that your child is excited about.
- If the child is being bullied at school, the teacher should get involved. Cheryl-Lynn Roberts suggests that teachers may want to teach positive communication in the classroom or work in a topic that might help all of the students understand the issue of bullying and what it means.
- "Parents can help children understand why they have a weight problem," says Barnicke Belleghem. "It could be the choice of foods they eat, a lack of exercise, or the fact that many people in their family are big boned and heavy so it is not all the child's responsibility."

If your child is being teased because of her weight, empowering her to make decisions and build self-esteem will make a significant impact. Interestingly, experts note that bullies should also receive counseling or intervention. "It's important that the bully get support too," says Roberts.

