

Confronting Body-Based Harassment

Tip Sheet for Teachers

What is Body-Based Harassment?

Body-based harassment refers to teasing and/or bullying based on an individual's physical appearance or abilities. It can take many forms including:

- Disparaging nicknames (e.g., fatso, stickman, melonhead)
- Negative comments about one's physical appearance (e.g., weight, height, facial characteristics, clothing, etc.)
- Social exclusion
- Physical aggression (e.g., pushing, poking, pinching)
- Hurtful jokes

When addressing the issue of body-based harassment with students, it is important to continually reinforce the message that *all* bodies deserve respect, and that healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes.

Set-point weight: An individual's body weight – like height – is largely determined by genetics. Each person has a biologically optimal weight range, which at maturity fluctuates by approximately 2-7 kilograms. It is healthiest for one's weight to remain within its natural set-point; therefore, the body will fight to maintain its set-point when deviations occur (e.g., through restricted caloric intake) by slowing or increasing metabolism.

- An individual's biologically *optimal* weight may not be the person's *ideal* weight, which is strongly influenced by societal ideals.
- Weight, like height, is diverse in humans and distributed in a normal bell curve.

Teasing is commonplace within the school setting; however, it is a fallacy to assume that teasing is generally a benign experience for students: Research has shown that teasing, particularly that which targets an individual's body shape or weight can have many painful and damaging consequences for an individual's well-being, including:

- Low body satisfaction
- Low self-esteem
- Eating disturbances (e.g., dieting, binge-eating)
- Depression
- Withdrawal from group and physical activities

Quick Facts on Body-Based Harassment

- Physical appearance, especially weight, is a frequent target for teasing within the school setting.
- Peers tend to be the primary source of body-based teasing.
- Children who are outside of the "normal" weight range (i.e., above average or below average weight) experience higher levels of body-based teasing compared to their average weight peers.
- Children who are above average in weight tend to be teased more frequently, more severely, in more domains (i.e., with regard to physical appearance *and* competency), and by a greater number of peers compared to average weight children.
- The negative effects of body-based teasing in childhood and adolescence (e.g., body-image dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, disordered eating patterns) can persist well into adulthood.
- Compared to their average weight peers, children who are above average weight are more likely to be victims of overt aggression (e.g., pushing, hitting; especially true for boys), and relational aggression (e.g., social exclusion; especially true for girls).

Given the ubiquity of body-based teasing within the school setting, and the negative consequences that it can have for an individual's well-being, it is important for teachers and students to work together to confront and reduce the occurrence of body-based teasing within their classrooms.

Tips for Coping with Body-Based Harassment

- Do not encourage or laugh at jokes that make fun of a person's body. Similarly, do not ignore negative comments about a person's physical appearance.
 - Inform students about the negative effects of making such comments (e.g., hurts people's feelings, makes people feel bad about themselves).
 - Challenge prevailing stereotypes (e.g., thinness is beautiful, fatness is ugly).
 - Directly and gently reinforce the message that a person's worth and morality are not related to their physical appearance.
- Teach and empower students to challenge negative comments in an assertive manner.
 - See **"How to Challenge Negative Comments"** for specific examples.
 - Role-playing activities in which the students act out and model different responses to situations can provide a powerful means for this. The teacher can act as a mediator who guides students to appropriate resolutions (e.g., by asking questions about how the teasing made the student feel, what he/she would like to say to the teaser, and by helping students formulate non-aggressive, assertive responses) during these activities.
 - Encourage students to speak out against body-based teasing within their peer group, and to refrain from becoming an "accomplice bystander" who witnesses the teasing and does nothing about it.
- Encourage students to practice positive self-talk. Encourage students to remind themselves of all the reasons (both physical and non-physical qualities) why they are worthy.
- Help students learn that the bullying is a reflection on the bully, not themselves.

How to Challenge Negative Comments

- Consider the context in which the comment was made
- Ask the student why he/she said what he/she did
- Ask the student what he/she hoped to convey with the statement
 - E.g., If the student expresses an emotion, the teacher can help him/her express that emotion without making a personal attack on another person and their physical appearance.

Examples: *(These can also be used as role play exercises)*

Jodie: "You're a big fat loser, Mina! Why did you do that?"

Teacher: "Jodie, that is not a nice thing to say. It is mean and hurtful to call Mina names. Are you frustrated that Mina didn't pass the ball to you? You need to focus on how to ask Mina to look more carefully for opportunities to pass you the ball. Both of you come here and let's practice! Start by apologizing for calling Mina names."

Jake: "Tommy is too fat to play this game."

Teacher: "Fat and thin people – and everyone in between- can be good at this game. Your size doesn't make a difference."

Or:

Teacher: "Tommy will be great at this game – he's very smart. He may not run as fast as you, but he can see where the ball should go, and can make some good plays. Size doesn't matter."

Note to teachers: It's very important that you do not imply that fat is bad. For example, we may consider the comment, "You're not too fat," to be consoling; however, such a comment actually just reinforces a prejudice. Fat is a description, just like tall or thin, but it has come to be used as a pejorative term to stand

in for “disliked, lazy, stupid, etc.” By reclaiming the word, it is possible to take the sting out of it.

Talia: “Your eyes are all squinty!”

Lucy: “All Chinese people have eyes like this. We see the same as you – sometimes better.”

Note to teachers: The trick with teaching assertive responses to body-based teasing is to treat it with humour, but not condone it. That is, try to help students learn how to take the ‘tease’ at face value and then empower them to ‘teach’ the teaser a fact which may take the wind out of the teaser’s sails.

A group of three girls are walking home together after school. Jenny starts to talk negatively about Rebecca, a friend who is not with them. Maya joins in and it escalates to both girls saying judgmental things about Rebecca. Emily steps in, challenges the negative comments, and tells the girls to stop talking about Rebecca behind her back.

Jenny: “Eww. Did you see what Rebecca was wearing today? She looked like she was wearing her grandma’s hand-me-downs.”

Maya joins in: “I know! I wouldn’t be caught dead in clothes like that... and she’s a big girl to begin with, so that just made everything worse. What a loser.”

Emily looks each girl in the eye and says: “Jenny, Maya, you’re just being mean and nasty. Stop insulting Rebecca, especially behind her back. She’s our friend. How do you think she would feel if she heard you talking about her like that?”

Please see www.preynet.ca for good resources and tips on bullying.