

Why are Obese Kids Performing Worse in School?

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Rebecca Puhl, Feb 11, 2010

In the past few years, there have been increasing studies reporting that overweight and obese children have poorer school performance than their normal weight peers. While this may be true, these findings are often interpreted without consideration to the psychosocial factors that may play a mediating role, and have instead pointed to missed school days as a result of ill health associated with obesity, or even inferior cognitive abilities among obese youth. A few studies speculated that weight-based victimization could be an important variable to examine, but none had studied it.

As more of these studies appeared in journals, I became increasingly concerned about the potential take-home message that obese youth are cognitively inferior to normal weight youth. The stigma stemming from such findings could be considerable, and would be yet another harmful outcome in addition to the emotional and social consequences that obese children already face as a result of stigma.

But recently, a study was published in the *International Journal of Pediatric Obesity*¹, that examined the links between body weight of children and their academic performance. The authors conducted a random parental telephone survey of 1,071 public school students in Arkansas, and like other studies before it, found that overweight status was a significant predictor of poorer school performance. However, the authors also specifically assessed whether weight-based teasing predicted poorer school performance. They found that it did, with worse school performance among overweight children who were teased about their weight. This is the first published study I've seen that identifies weight-based teasing as a possible mediator in the relationship between children's body weight and their academic performance. And it makes so much sense.

Obese children aren't doing worse in school because they're not as smart as thinner students. They're doing worse in school because they face frequent (and often daily) victimization and harassment from peers because of their weight.² They are afraid to walk down the hallways because of negative remarks they receive from schoolmates. They are made fun of in physical education classes, mocked in the school cafeteria, and teased on the bus. Anecdotes from participants in our own studies also suggest that many students skip classes or miss days of school because of this torment. And we already know that overweight and obese youth who are victimized because of their weight have higher risk of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, poor body image, and suicidal behaviors.² How could this not impact school performance?

My hope is that more studies like this will continue to surface, and that we can increase awareness among educators, health providers, and policy-makers that weight-based teasing and victimization is a widespread problem facing today's overweight youth, and that it has real consequences for their emotional well-being, their physical health, and even their educational futures.

1Krukowski RA, Smith West D, Philyaw Perez Z, Bursac Z, Phillips MM, Raczynski JM. Overweight children, weight-based teasing and academic performance. Int J Pediatr Obes. 2009; 4(4): 274-280.

2Puhl R, Latner J. Obesity, Stigma, and the Health of the Nation's Children. Psychological Bulletin, 2007; 133(4) 557-580.

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