

Shaming overweight kids only makes things worse

November 20 2017, by Serena Gordon, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—Overweight kids who are shamed or stigmatized are more

likely to binge eat or isolate themselves than to make positive changes such as losing weight, a leading pediatricians' group says.

In a new policy statement, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) offers guidance to help parents, teachers, school officials and pediatricians assist overweight and obese children without making them feel bad about themselves.

"We see a growing problem regarding [weight](#) stigma. In a misguided attempt to get kids to change, people end up reinforcing negative coping behaviors," said [policy statement](#) lead author Dr. Stephen Pont.

"We saw an opportunity to make providers aware of the stigma and to make the public aware of the weight stigma," he added.

People often believe that by shaming an overweight person or child they can help motivate them to make healthy changes in their lives. But that's definitely not what happens.

The statement authors said rather than motivating kids, stigmatizing them can worsen obesity by making children less likely to be physically active or to seek health care. It also makes binge eating and social isolation more likely, the statement said.

Weight stigma can dramatically affect the quality of life of [young people](#)

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Dr. Chris Karampahtsis is a child, adolescent and adult psychiatrist at NYU Winthrop Hospital in Mineola, N.Y. He said he saw a previous study that compared quality of life for [cancer patients](#) versus quality of life for obese patients, and that cancer patients reported a better quality of life.

The new statement, published online Nov. 20 in the journal *Pediatrics*, is accompanied by a new study that focused on how society and the media aren't helping to dampen the stigma overweight kids feel. What's worse, the media is likely a significant contributor to young people's weight problems in the first place.

This study, whose lead author is Dr. Eliana Perrin of Duke University School of Medicine, looked at 31 top-grossing G and PG-rated movies from 2012 to 2015.

The researchers found that all of the movies had obesity-promoting content. For example, 87 percent showed unhealthy food and 71 percent showed excessive portion sizes. Nearly two-thirds of the films showed people drinking sugar-sweetened beverages.

As these movies promote unhealthy behaviors that could lead to obesity, they also stigmatize kids who weigh too much, the researchers noted.

Eighty-four percent of the movies promoted weight-related stigma, such as a verbal insult on body weight. The researchers also noted that these weren't isolated incidents, but themes that cropped up throughout the movies.

What can parents do to help their overweight kids deal with other kids and the media, and maybe even their own negative talk?

First, parents probably feel the need to correct dangerous behaviors quickly, Pont noted. Parents may default to behaviors they learned growing up and say things like, "Don't eat that. You'll get fat."

"That makes the child feel poorly, and definitely not motivated to wash vegetables for a salad," Pont said.

Parents need to be mindful of their word choices, he said, and they need to help their child make small changes.

"Let your child guide the ship and choose what to change. Maybe the family—yes, family, so you don't isolate the kiddo—will start eating more fruits and vegetables," Pont said.

"I think most parents approach weight with good intentions. Clearly, [parents](#) want to help their child maintain the best health they can. And they may not be aware that the way they approach the conversation may have the opposite effect," said Karampahtsis, who wasn't involved with the study.

"Approaching the topic of weight in an empathetic, sensitive manner is critical. Don't call the child fat or obese. The goal is to motivate behavioral change to maintain good health," he said.

Both experts said it's a smart idea to involve the child's doctor.

Sometimes kids don't actually need to lose weight, Pont said. If they can avoid gaining weight, then their weight may normalize as they grow. Kids are still building bones and muscle, so it's important they get the right nutrition to do so. The pediatrician can help you figure out what steps your [child](#) needs to take to live a healthier life, he noted.

More information: Stephen Pont, M.D., M.P.H., founding chair, American Academy of Pediatrics Section of Obesity's Executive Committee, and assistant professor, University of Texas Dell Medical School, Austin; Chris Karampahtsis, M.D., M.P.H., child, adolescent and adult psychiatrist, NYU Winthrop Hospital, Mineola, N.Y.; Nov. 20, 2017, *Pediatrics*

For advice on teaching kids about healthy lifestyles, visit the [Academy](#)

[of Nutrition and Dietetics.](#)

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