

Concerns about child's weight increase risk for family weight teasing

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Parental concern over children's weight can lead to family teasing, according to new research. Credit: Shutterstock

Parental concerns about child's weight and encouraging their child to diet increase the likelihood of weight-based teasing by family members, according to a new study from researchers at the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity and the University of Minnesota. Adolescents teased about their weight by family members were also found to have higher levels of stress and substance use and lower self-esteem in young adulthood.

Adolescence is a critical developmental period for children that often comes with increased social pressures and criticism. While adolescents often face criticism and victimization about their [weight](#) at school from peers, [family members](#) can be another main source of negative weight talk and teasing. This is particularly concerning given the [health consequences](#) that result from weight-based bullying, such as [emotional distress](#), eating disorders, and substance use.

"We know that family weight teasing during adolescence can be harmful, but few studies have examined [risk factors](#) for teasing beyond adolescent characteristics such as BMI and gender," says Leah Lessard, lead author of the study and postdoctoral fellow at the Rudd Center. "To support families and reduce weight teasing at home, it is important to understand how parents may contribute to family weight teasing."

The study, published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, reports on findings from Project EAT, a population-based, longitudinal cohort study of weight-related health and associated factors in young people. Mothers, fathers, and adolescents all participated. Surveys assessed adolescents experiences of family teasing and their subsequent health behaviors eight years later in young adulthood. Parent surveys focused on topics like concerns about their child's weight, weight-related parenting practices, and their own dieting behaviors.

Key findings include:

- Mothers' and fathers' concerns about their child's weight, and frequent encouragement of their child to diet, increased the likelihood of adolescents being teased or made fun of by family members because of their weight.
- Adolescents were more likely to report being teased by family members when mothers reported more frequent dieting.
- Adolescents who were teased by family members because of their weight had greater levels of stress, substance use, and lower self-esteem eight years later in young adulthood compared to those who were not teased about their weight during adolescence.

"These results highlight the long-term harmful effects that weight teasing by family members can have on outcomes such as emotional health,

[substance use](#) and stress," says Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, professor at the University of Minnesota and principal investigator of the EAT cohort study. "As we've learned from these findings, it is important to reduce weight teasing in the home environment. Encouraging parents to focus on child health, rather than weight, may reduce weight teasing and its harmful consequences."

Study authors also encourage [healthcare providers](#) working with families to be aware that parental weight concerns might increase the likelihood of family weight teasing, and to use sensitive and non-stigmatizing language when communicating with youth and families about weight. These practices can demonstrate appropriate communication behaviors to parents in ways that help increase their awareness of weight teasing and the negative impact it can have on their child's wellbeing.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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