



University of California CalFresh Nutrition Education Program

KIDS SAY THE MEANEST THINGS

Childhood obesity rates continue to rise. There has been much information on the health risks to the overweight child including bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes. Little attention has been given to the social and psychological consequences, such as stigmatization and poor self-esteem. Just what are the effects on the child who is called “fatso” on the playground? And, have things changed as the prevalence of obesity rises?

According to a Yale University study in 2007, overweight and obese children who are subjected to verbal taunts and physical bullying are substantially more prone during childhood to suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, and high blood pressure.

A recent survey revealed that obese children rate their quality of life as low as those of young cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. There is a growing body of research that addresses the psychological impact of obesity, especially among public school children. Research has indicated the process of stigmatization could explain an association between obesity and psychological disorders. A stigmatized person possesses “some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in some particular context”. (Puhl & Brownell, 2003)

The prevalence of childhood obesity has more than doubled in the period from 1961 to 2001. A well known 1961 study of stigma in childhood obesity was replicated in 2001 to see what effect the increased prevalence has had on this stigma. Fifth and sixth grade children were asked to rank six drawings (child in a wheelchair, one on crutches, another with an amputated hand, the fourth with facial disfigurement, fifth showed an average weight child with no disabilities, and the sixth showed an overweight child), in order of how well they liked each child. Children in both studies liked the obese child least, but the obese child was liked significantly less in the 2001 study than in the 1961 study.

Teachers can help by being a role model for both the obese child and the children who make fun of them. Talking about healthy eating can easily become a part of the morning routine. When taking a lunch count, discuss the menu - what food groups are included, are these foods on MyPlate or “sometimes” foods, etc. If eating or drinking in front of students, it is important to set an example. Class parties are just as fun with a big fruit platter as a plate of brownies. Give a little extra attention to the obese child. Often this child gets overlooked by everyone. Lead by example.