



Weight Bias in Youth: Implications for Teachers

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Objectives

OVERVIEW:

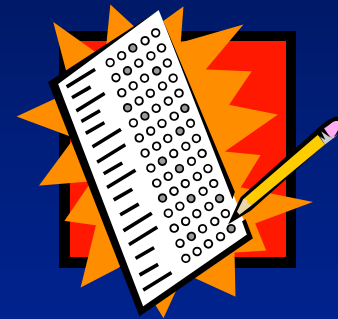
- Youth as targets of weight bias
- Sources of weight bias
- How bias affects health
- Strategies to reduce bias

What is Weight Bias?

- **Negative attitudes affecting interactions**
- **Stereotypes leading to:**
 - stigma
 - rejection
 - prejudice
 - discrimination
- **Verbal, physical, and relational forms**
- **Subtle and overt expressions**

How is Bias Measured?

- **Self-Report Attitude Surveys**
- **Experimental Studies**
- **Implicit Association Test**



<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/index.jsp>

IMPLICIT ASSOCIATIONS TEST

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/index.jsp>

Word Categorization

Flowers		Insects
Bad		Good
<input type="radio"/>	wonderful	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Roach	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	nasty	<input type="radio"/>
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Daisy	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	joyful	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Tulip	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	terrible	<input type="radio"/>

Guidelines

Go fast

Try not to make mistakes

Don't correct errors

Don't skip any items

Quick check through circle

Word Category Switch

Insects		Flowers
Bad		Good
<input type="radio"/>	wonderful	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Roach	<input type="radio"/>
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	nasty	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Daisy	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	joyful	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Tulip	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	terrible	<input type="radio"/>

IMPLICIT ATTITUDES ABOUT WEIGHT

Fat Children

fat

obese

large

Thin Children

slim

thin

skinny

Good

wonderful

joyful

excellent

Bad

terrible

nasty

horrible

Stupid

dumb

stupid

dense

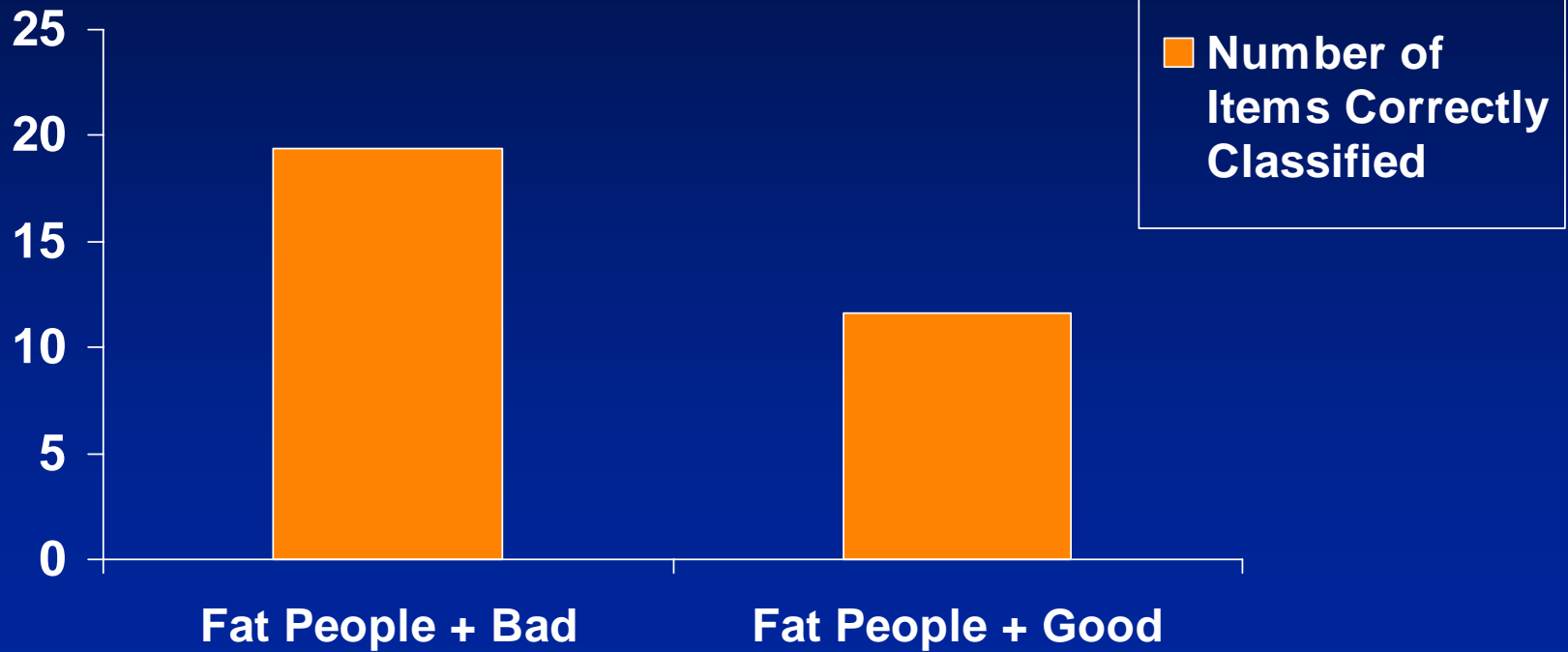
Smart

intelligent

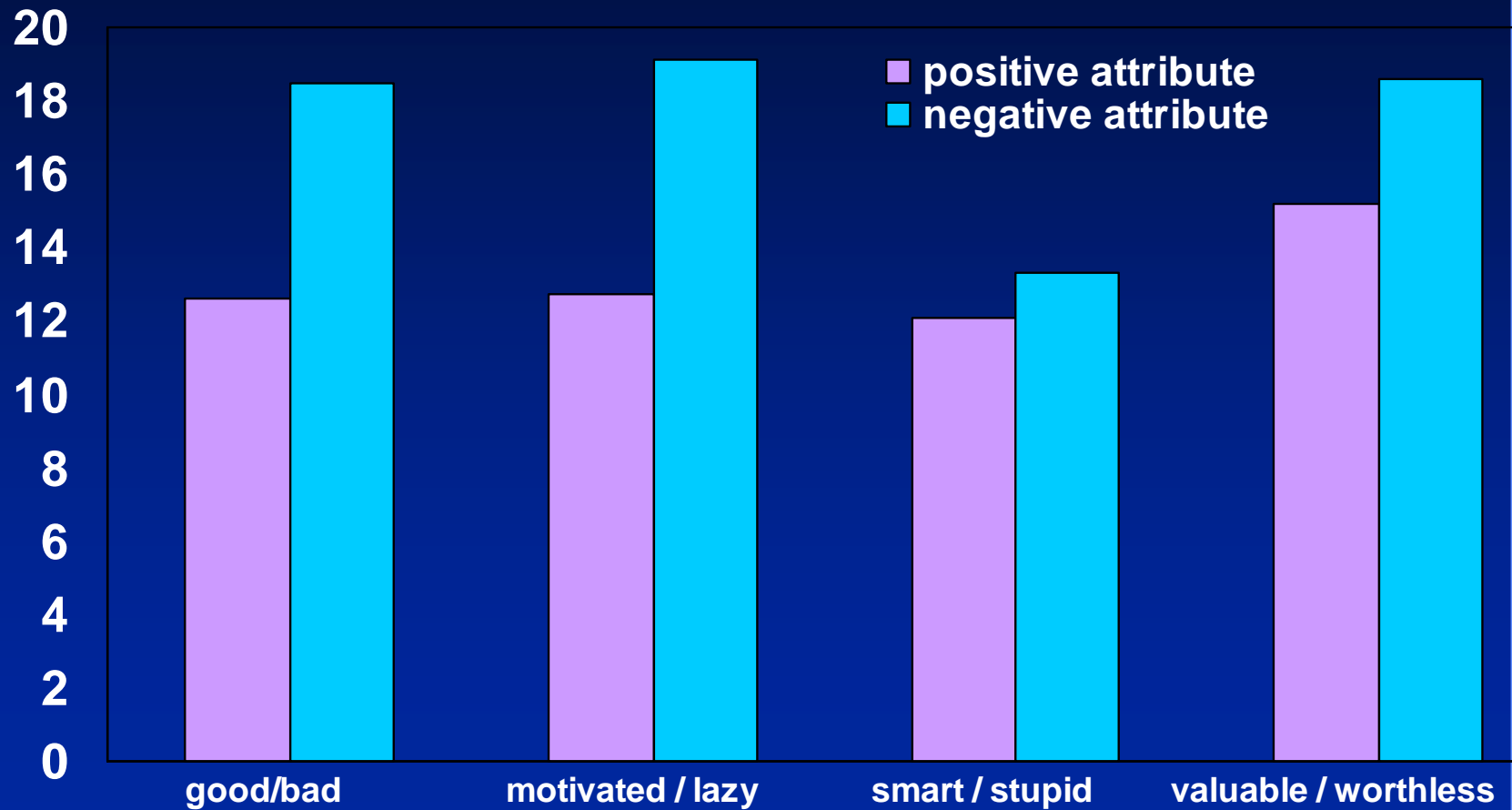
smart

bright

Implicit Attitudes



Implicit Attitudes



Why Care?

- **Fosters blame and intolerance**
- **Impacts multiple domains of living**
- **Hurts quality of life for children**
- **Has serious medical and emotional effects**

Science on Weight Bias

Evidence in multiple domains:

- Employment
- Education
- Health care
- Media
- Interpersonal Relationships

Weight bias in Education

- Extensive peer victimization at school
- Bias by teachers & school administrators
- Bias at institutional levels



Weight Bias by Peers

- **Negative attitudes begin in pre-school**
- **Obese children viewed by peers as:**

lazy
stupid
ugly
unhappy

mean
having few friends
undesirable playmates



- **Bias continues in high school & college**

Peer Victimization

Among overweight youth, **30%** of girls and **24%** of boys are *teased at school*

Vulnerability to bias increases with body weight

Among the *heaviest* youth, **60%** report victimization

Being overweight predicts future victimization

Examples

“Kids at school would make fun of me, and kick me. It made me feel worse about myself. It has made me depressed so I just eat more.”

“All through school, kids called me names, laughed at me, tripped me, stuck pins in me to see if I would pop. It still hurts.”

“Every single minute of high school was awful. I weighed 240 pounds when I was 14. I was spit on, pinched, teased daily. I was ridiculed and had no real friends.”

“My mother took me out of kindergarten because I would come home every day crying. The kids made fun of me all day long- in class, on the playground, and on the walk home. I would be hysterical by the time I got home.”

Weight Bias by Educators

- **Teachers report that obese students are:**

Untidy

More emotional

Less likely to succeed at work

More likely to have family problems



- **Educators have lower expectations for overweight youth**

Educational Institutions

- Lower educational attainment
- Lower college acceptances
- Wrongful dismissal from college



National Education Association (1994)

“For fat students, the school experience is one of ongoing prejudice, unnoticed discrimination, and almost constant harassment”



“From nursery school through college, fat students experience ostracism, discouragement, and sometimes violence”

Examples

“My worst experience of being overweight would have to be one of my male teachers (who was also my softball coach) in high school constantly making fun of my weight in front of my other classmates.”

“A grade school teacher commented that I was the fattest kid in the class. I wanted to cry but didn't. From then on I was forever conscious of my size. I never wanted to get on a scale again at school.”

“When I was 8, my elementary school gym teacher saw me walking down the hall with my saxophone when I was on my way to music class, and he asked me if the case was my “lunch box” in a very rude demeanor. I was extremely upset by his remark and I went home and told my mother. She called the school principal and the teacher was put on probation because of the comment.”

Bias Expressed by Parents

- Bias modeled at home by parents
- Parental victimization of children
- Lower college acceptance rates....
because of parents?



2,449 obese and overweight women

Source of Bias	Ever Experienced	More than Once & Multiple Times
Family members	72	62
Doctors	69	52
Classmates	64	56
Sales clerks	60	47
Friends	60	42
Co-workers	54	38
Mother	53	44
Spouse	47	32
Servers at restaurants	47	35
Nurses	46	34
Members of community	46	35
Father	44	34
Employer/supervisor	43	26
Sister	37	28
Dietitians/nutritionists	37	26
Brother	36	28
Teachers/professors	32	21
Authority figure (e.g. police)	23	15
Mental Health Professionals	21	13
Son	20	13
Daughter	18	12
Other	17	13

Puhl & Brownell, 2006

Examples

“My dad use to call me a cow as I was growing up. It still hurts.”

“I overheard my father as a young child tell my mother I was disgusting fat pig.”

“My father used to pinch my arm at dinner and call me lazy.”

“My mother told me in a loud voice at a family gathering that I should buy my clothes at the tent and awning supply store.”

“My mother told me that I won't find a boyfriend/husband being fat. She said that no one could fit their arms around me, that I was the biggest person she's ever seen, and swears I get bigger each time she looks at me.”

“My mother put little signs on the fridge – ‘little snacks make bigger slacks.’ ”

The Personal (and very real) Consequences

- ✓ **Psychological**
- ✓ **Social and Economic**
- ✓ **Medical**

**Weight
Bias**



**Vulnerability
For**



Depression

Anxiety

**Low
Self-Esteem**

**Poor
Body Image**

**Suicidal Acts
and Thoughts**

Cattarin & Thompson, 1994; Eisenberg et al., 2003; Haines, Neumark-Sztainer, Eisenberg, & Hannan, 2006; Hayden-Wade et al., 2005; Lunner et al., 2000; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002; Shroff & Thompson, 2004; Thompson et al., 1995; van den Berg et al., 2002; Young-Hyman et al., 2003

Social and Economic Consequences

- **Social rejection**
- **Poor quality of relationships**
- **Worse academic outcomes**
- **Lower SES**

Health Consequences



➤ Unhealthy eating behaviors

- binge eating
- unhealthy weight control practices
- coping with stigma with eating more and refusing to diet

..more health consequences

- **Avoidance of physical activity**
- **Cardiovascular health**
 - elevated ambulatory blood pressure
 - increased physiological stress
- **Poor quality of life overall**

Origins of Weight Bias

- **Societal/media portrayals of obesity**
- **Cultural values of thinness**
- **Attributions about causes of obesity**

TV Portrayals of Obesity

275 episodes of top-rated TV shows on 6 networks:

- **African Americans heavier than Caucasians**
- **Few obese characters on television**
- **Obese characters in stereotypical roles**
- **Fewer positive social interactions, romantic and sexual relationships**

(Television show Friends)

Thin Monica

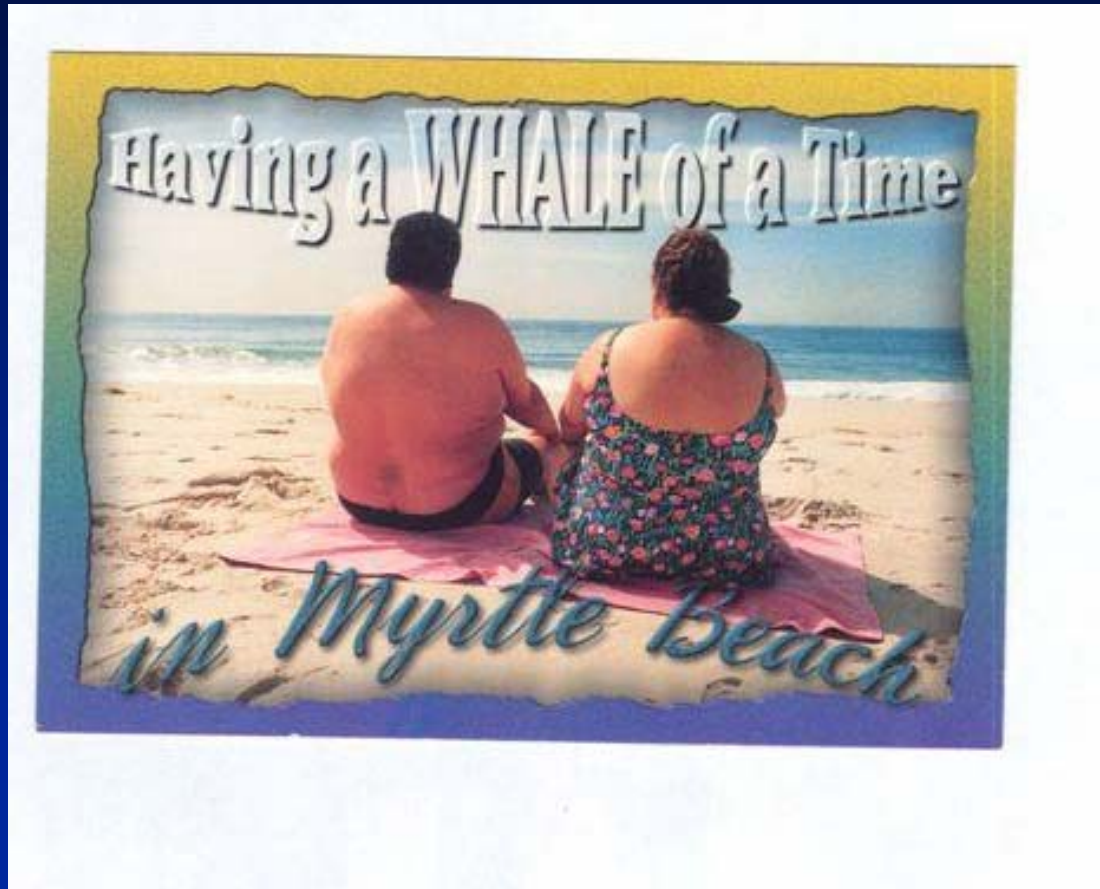


'Fat Monica'





Postcards / Greeting Cards



2. Should overweight kids be taken from their parents?

Last year, three-year-old Albuquerque, New Mexico, native Anamarie Martinez-Rogino, right, was taken into custody by state officials, who believed she was so overweight that her health was at risk. Should the state have intervened?

38% say yes

"Kids need their parents to manage their food consumption, and if this girl's diet is off the charts, her parents are failing her."

-SALLY, 24, TOPEKA, KANS.

62% say no

"The state should offer diet counseling rather than rip the family apart. A happy fat child seems better to me than a miserable thin one." -JANET, 25, RALEIGH, N.C.



Cultural Influences

- **Societal Values of Thinness**
- **The myth of the infinitely malleable body**
- **Dieting/beauty industry:
“If you only work hard enough”**

Attributions about Obesity

- Onset is controllable
- Condition is reversible
- “if an obese person works hard enough, he or she can lose weight”



Evidence of Attributions

- **Children and adults are less likely to express weight bias if they perceive the cause of obesity to be *external factors***
- **Individualistic countries have stronger weight bias than collectivist countries**

How Do We Reduce Weight Bias?



Education about Causes of Obesity

Educate participants about the biological, genetic, and external causes of obesity

Does this work?

2 Studies **IMPROVED** attitudes

2 Studies **DID NOT CHANGE** attitudes

Other Strategies

- **Evoke Empathy**
- **Address Normative Attitudes**
- **Use Multiple Stigma-Reduction Methods**

What Can Teachers Do?

- 1) Emphasize positive associations with obesity
- 2) Provide accurate information about the causes of obesity
- 3) Increase awareness of media influences on body image and weight
- 4) Use stories of weight bias to invoke empathy in students
- 5) Be sensitive to potential situations of embarrassment
- 6) Question your own assumptions and use of language
- 7) Intervene to reduce teasing

What Can Teachers Do?

- Encourage overweight students to succeed
- Include examples of overweight role models in your teaching
- Teach students how to advocate weight tolerance
- Emphasize HEALTH over thinness
- Encourage zero-tolerance bullying policy

Questions for Group Discussion

Have you witnessed weight bias by students or teachers at your school? If so, what occurred in these situations? How did you respond?

Do you think that stereotypes about obese persons could affect the way that obese students are treated by teachers? Why or why not?

What do you think are the most common stereotypes about obese individuals?

Do you believe that these stereotypes are generally true or false?

What strategies do you think would be especially helpful to reduce weight bias at your school?



Additional Resources

Yale Rudd Center

www.YaleRuddCenter.org (click on Weight Bias)

“Weight Bias: Nature, Consequences, and Remedies”
Guilford Press, 2005

