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Weight-Based Bullying from Peers Contributes to Lower Academic Performance
Teachers Play an Important Role in Mitigating Negative Academic Consequences

Hartford, CT – Weight-based bullying from peers has a negative impact on adolescents’ academic grades, according to a new study by researchers at the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. The study, published in School Psychology, also finds that the link between weight-based bullying and school performance is weaker when students perceive their teachers to be more helpful in preventing bullying in the future.

Weight-based bullying is one of the most prevalent forms of harassment that adolescents face at school, with over 78% of high school students reporting observing this type of bullying. Weight-based bullying can have a serious impact on adolescents’ education, and not just by causing social or emotional distress. Bullying can take a harmful toll on academic achievement, especially when it takes place in the school setting. Despite this evidence, little is known about which sources of weight-based bullying have the largest effect on school performance and the potential of teachers to support students who are victimized.

“We know that adolescents’ academic performance takes a hit when they are teased and bullied about their weight, but few studies have examined whether the academic harms are intensified when this bullying comes from different sources, like peers or teachers” says Leah Lessard, lead author of the study and postdoctoral fellow at the Rudd Center. “To support the educational success of students experiencing weight-based bullying, it is important to understand not only bullying from whom is contributing to underperformance, but also how teachers can most effectively intervene during instances of mistreatment.”

Using a sample of 148 adolescents with higher body weight engaged in weight loss treatment, the study investigated associations between weight-based bullying by school-based sources (i.e. peers, friends, teachers, and coaches) and academic grades, and the potential of teachers to lessen these consequences. Participants completed questionnaires to evaluate their experiences of weight-based bullying, perceptions of teachers’ role in weight-based bullying intervention, and academic grades.

Key findings include:

- When accounting for different sources of bullying, weight-based bullying from peers was the only source associated with students reporting significantly lower grades.
- 98% of participants reported at least one incident of weight-based bullying from peers.
• Weight-based bullying had less impact on academic grades when students perceived their teachers to be helpful in preventing future bullying.
• Fewer than 1-in-5 students perceived their teachers to be "helpful" or "very helpful" in preventing future weight-based bullying.

“Given that few students perceived their teachers to be helpful in preventing weight-based bullying, these results emphasize the importance of teacher intervention to support adolescents’ academic performance” says Lessard.

Study findings highlight how educators can help to reduce the academic consequences of weight-based bullying, with the following recommendations from authors:

• School psychologists and administrators should encourage consistent teacher intervention during incidents of weight-based bullying.
• Professional development opportunities for educators should include awareness of the harmful academic consequences of weight-based bullying.
• Schools should provide teachers with specific resources to support students bullied for their weight.

Study co authors include Samantha Lawrence and Rebecca Puhl at the University of Connecticut.

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**About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity**
The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a multidisciplinary center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet and activity patterns by conducting research and educating policy makers. For more information, visit [www.uconnruddcenter.org](http://www.uconnruddcenter.org), follow us on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter](http://www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter), and on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter](http://www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter).