



A person is bullied when he or she is repeatedly exposed to the intentional negative actions of another person. Main elements of bullying:

- an *intention to harm* the victim
- a *difference in power* between the victim and the perpetrator
- a *pattern of behaviour that is repeated* over time

## Overweight/Obesity and the Link to Bullying: A Review

The BC Injury Research and Prevention Unit conducted an extensive literature review to identify recent research evidence on the association between obesity and bullying. The purpose was to understand whether people who are overweight or obese are more likely to experience injury as a result of bullying compared with people who are of healthy weight.

Physical aggression poses a clear risk of injury to the victim. While verbal and relational forms of aggression do not directly cause physical injury, there is evidence to suggest that relational aggression may indirectly increase the risk of injury through weapon carrying, suicide attempts, and self-harm.

**Methods:** Specific criteria clearly defined the type of research that was considered relevant to the review. The search required that the title or the abstract of the report contained both 1) terms related to body weight (e.g., obesity, BMI) and 2) terms related to bullying. Five electronic research databases were searched for evidence (CINAHL, EMBASE, ERIC, Medline, PsycINFO), and 5,744 unique citations were identified. A screening process using systematic review software (Distiller SR) identified the studies that met the inclusion criteria. A total of 33 unique studies were identified. Important characteristics of each study were extracted and summarized in a series of tables. Finally, interviews with key informants were conducted.

### Results:

- There were contradictory results as to whether overweight or obese youth are at increased risk of being physically victimized compared to healthy weight peers.
- Some studies found that overweight or obese participants were significantly more likely than healthy-weight peers to experience relational aggression (i.e., social exclusion), but other studies did not find evidence of this association.
- In all age groups, individuals who were overweight or obese were significantly more likely to experience verbal aggression (i.e., teasing) compared with individuals who were not overweight.

**BC INJURY** research and prevention unit

- \* **Leaders in the production and transfer of injury prevention knowledge and the integration of evidence-based injury prevention practice in the daily lives of British Columbians**

### Types of Bullying:

**Physical aggression** refers to harmful acts involving bodily contact with the victims. Examples include hitting, pushing, and kicking.

**Relational aggression** refers to harming others by damaging their social relationships. Examples include spreading rumours and excluding others from social groups.

**Verbal aggression** refers to harming others by saying hurtful things to them. Examples include teasing, criticizing, and name-calling.

## What can be done now?

- Parents, teachers, health practitioners, and other professionals need to be aware of the links among weight and bullying to help them to identify those at risk who may benefit from intervention. Appropriate school-based mental health services could help to provide a source of support for victims of bullying.
- There is a need to implement interventions to reduce all forms of bullying, including weight-related bullying. Although it is not yet known whether existing anti-bullying programs can reduce weight-related bullying, a good place to start would be to implement evidence-based programs that have been shown to reduce bullying overall.

## Suggestions for anti-bullying interventions:

- Schools were identified as an appropriate setting for anti-bullying interventions
- Teachers and other school staff should be educated about the best way to intervene when they see a student who is bullying others or being bullied
- School-wide policies can be implemented that promote inclusion, discourage teasing, and ensure monitoring of locations in which bullying is most likely to occur (e.g., classrooms, lunch rooms, locker rooms, gym)
- Programs promoting good nutrition and physical activity can be implemented with all students to promote healthy weight, but do not have to focus on weight reduction as a goal

### Examples of Evidence-based Bullying Interventions

Beyond the Hurt

<http://www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=39953&tid=001>

Fourth R

[www.youthrelationships.org](http://www.youthrelationships.org)

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

[www.violencepreventionworks.org](http://www.violencepreventionworks.org)

Steps to Respect

[www.cfchildren.org/steps-to-respect](http://www.cfchildren.org/steps-to-respect)

W.I.T.S. (Walk Away, Ignore, Talk it out, Seek help)

[www.witsprogram.ca](http://www.witsprogram.ca)

Best Practices Portal of the Public Health Agency of Canada

<http://66.240.150.14/index-eng.html>

## Limitations:

A number of weaknesses of the current studies limit the ability to confidently interpret the results and have confidence in their application in BC. These include:

- Few Canadian studies
- Most studies did not include information on the reliability and validity of the bullying questionnaires and many studies did not provide a clear definition of the type of bullying measured
- Very little research has been conducted to investigate the association between weight and physical aggression. The results of recent studies are conflicting
- Most reports did not include important information about the participants (e.g., ethnicity, socioeconomic status), or the specifics of the selection criteria. Several studies did not use a random sample of participants
- The studies were not consistent in the way they grouped participants into different weight categories and many studies did not differentiate between overweight and obese groups

## Future Research:

- Conduct more research to better determine the association between weight and physical aggression
- Investigate what types of injuries are sustained by victims of physical aggression
- Consider other factors and contexts that might influence the association between weight and bullying (e.g., sex, ethnicity, personality, sexual orientation, emotional functioning)
- Use longitudinal research designs and follow participants over time
- Assess bullying using reliable and valid measures, clearly identify the type of bullying, use different sources of information (e.g., teachers), and include qualitative research methods
- Determine whether or not anti-bullying interventions need to focus on obesity in order to reduce weight-related bullying
- Evaluate existing anti-bullying interventions using strong research designs (i.e. randomized controlled trials) to determine whether they reduce weight-related bullying