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Study finds weight teasing from different family members linked to harmful health outcomes for adolescents

Weight teasing from mothers emerged as the most consistently significant family source associated with negative outcomes for adolescents

Hartford, Conn. – Weight-related teasing from family members is a common experience for adolescents, yet little research has examined how teasing from specific relatives uniquely affects youth health and well-being. Now, a new study from the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health is shedding light on how weight teasing from different family members relates to adolescents’ eating behaviors, body image, and internalized weight stigma.

Using data from a national sample of 1,073 U.S. adolescents ages 10 to 17, researchers examined associations between weight teasing from 11 distinct family members and a range of adolescent health outcomes, including binge eating, unhealthy weight control behaviors, body appreciation, and internalized weight bias. Specific family members examined in the study include parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins.

The findings reveal that weight teasing from female relatives - particularly mothers, sisters, aunts, and cousins - was consistently associated with more harmful outcomes for adolescents, while teasing from male relatives showed less consistent patterns.

“Most research treats the family as a single source of weight stigma, obscuring the distinct roles of specific members,” says Rui Wu, lead author of the study. “Our study provides new evidence that teasing from different family relationships uniquely impacts adolescents’ well-being.”

Study findings, published in the *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, also challenge the prevailing assumption that weight stigma only affects adolescents with higher body weights. Instead, weight-related stigma occurs across a wide range of body sizes.

Specific key findings include:

- Weight teasing from female relatives was consistently linked to binge eating, unhealthy weight control behaviors, greater internalized weight bias, and lower body appreciation among adolescents.
- Weight teasing from male family members showed fewer and less consistent associations with negative adolescent outcomes.

- Across nearly all family sources, more girls reported experiencing weight-related teasing than boys. Girls reported particularly high levels of teasing from female relatives, highlighting the role of same-gender dynamics in the transmission of weight stigma within families.
- Weight teasing from mothers emerged as the most consistently significant family source associated with negative outcomes for both boys and girls.
- Adolescents with BMIs in the 5th–84.9th percentile reported high rates of family-based weight teasing, challenging the assumption that weight stigma only affects youth with higher body weights.

“Our findings highlight that reducing weight stigma requires family-centered, relationship-specific approaches that engage the broader family network and equip pediatric providers to address the distinct roles that family dynamics play in adolescents’ experiences,” says Dr. Rebecca Puhl, Principal Investigator and co-author on the study.

The study underscores the importance of pediatric providers screening all youth for weight-based teasing from a wide range of family members and developing interventions that address weight stigma across the broader family system.

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health at the University of Connecticut promotes solutions to food insecurity, poor diet quality, and weight bias through research and policy. For more information, visit uconnruddcenter.org, follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and [Bluesky](#), and [subscribe to our monthly mailing list](#).