

Respecting Body Size

By Trisha Whitney

The goal of an anti-bias program is to help our children grow to understand and accept themselves and all people. Everyone has the right to be treated with respect.

While teaching our children to stand up against bias based on race, gender and ability, we also need to include people - children as well as adults - who are larger than the norm. It continues to be acceptable in our society to harass and publicly despise fat people. No one deserves such treatment. Whatever your opinion is about what size a particular child should be, that child needs to feel self-confident and worthy of respect regardless of size.

I am using the word *fat* in this article purposely. If you feel shocked by the use of the word, you are not alone. The fact is that while people, including young children, are thought of as fat by our society, the word *fat* is used only in disgust. People in the Size Acceptance movement feel it is important to take the stigma from this simple descriptive word. If we are made uncomfortable by the word fat, how can we be accepting of children we consider to *be* fat, whether we speak the word out loud or not? Fat people themselves use different terms to describe who they are-fat, large, super-size, a BBW (Big Beautiful Woman!). Most object to the term "overweight" as it alludes to some arbitrary standard "perfect" weight everyone is supposed to be. Although it is never appropriate to label an individual child, getting comfortable with the word fat - reading, thinking, and saying it without disgust or a joke intended - may help you come to see body size as just another variable of the human condition.

It does not take long for fat children to learn that their size is seen as a

"problem" by most people. Parents, doctors and even neighbors worry over and discuss their "problem" endlessly. Other children call them names. Television shows contain jokes at the expense of fat characters at the average rate of one per show. There is no greater role teachers can play in these children's lives than to create an atmosphere that encourages peer acceptance and the child's own self-esteem.

With this support, these children will have a better chance to become self-assured, healthy people. The first goal of the Anti-Bias Curriculum is to help children feel good about themselves and the groups to which they belong.

To support these children, treat them like the rest. Don't make a big deal over their size. Don't point out their pot belly or call them "cute" little names like "chubby." Make sure to be as physical and affectionate with fat children as you are with the others. Often we expect large children to be older than they are and less interested in cuddles, or we are repulsed through our own bias against fat. It is easy, without even realizing it, to distance ourselves from larger children. If you pick up several children for a hug, be prepared to pick up your large child as well, and *without* exclamations of surprise at their weight.

Don't make a fuss over their food.

Food is the stuff of life, especially to active, growing children. Children often equate safety, security, and being taken care of with being given enough to eat. All of the children should be offered healthful food. Nothing can make a child focus on food more than feeling deprived of it. If children sense that you are attempting to serve them smaller portions or discouraging seconds while serving others, they are likely to start eating whatever they can get their hands on in case they are restricted from eating later.

Emphasize their strength. Teachers can notice large children's special abilities, pointing them out to the child and any peers within earshot. It's difficult to realize, but size is such an issue for our society that large children may not know there *is* anything good about them. Be sure to notice their physical skills. Fat children have an especially hard time feeling good about their bodies in any way.

Help other children to respect and accept everyone of every size.

The second and third goals of the Anti-Bias Curriculum are to teach children to empathize with others and to recognize bias when they see it. One cannot very well learn to be accepting of and comfortable with all people - except fat ones. All of the children in your class (even if you don't have a large child this year) need to learn to accept and respect people of all sizes. Create opportunities for your students to experience and discuss body size. Some children may have learned to feel (as many adults I do) that being large is unacceptable, or even "gross." Remind them that someone's size is the size they *are*. We need to accept them as themselves and treat them with respect.

Intervention in bias incidents involving fat children is critical in creating an anti-bias classroom that feels safe to all children. The fourth ABC goal is to encourage children to stand against bias. Reassure the fat children that they should not have to deal with biased behavior toward them. Sometimes it is necessary to directly negate harmful images that have been stated. ("Being a big person does not mean you are a pig. The two have nothing to do with each other.") Intervention should also include reinforcement of the classroom rule (which should have been well established early in the year)

that each person is to be treated with respect (For young children this is often translated into the rule, "Everyone can feel safe in our room.")

How Does This All Work Out in Practice?

My class last year included a very tall, large-boned girl who is built exactly like her 6'4" dad (a former football player). Many people looking at her would consider her to be fat, and I know she faced some harassment from playmates in preschool. I purposely found activities for us to do that would emphasize her strength - using a wheelbarrow, digging a hole, hammering pieces of wood together, and hitting a tennis ball with a bat. I took these activities as opportunities to build up her self-esteem for physical things. We measured our heights on the wall and appreciated the diversity we found. We noticed that age and height don't necessarily go together. Kids come in many different sizes!

This year I managed to get a fat doll, Elizabeth, to include in my Persona Doll collection. This allowed me to bring into our circle a discussion of a time Elizabeth was teased about being fat. The kids discussed how it made her feel, why the children teased her, and what *they* would do in a similar situation. They practiced supporting the fat doll. They practiced empathy. I noticed one child take an especial liking to Elizabeth, requesting her each time the dolls were handed around and having quiet talks in her ear. It was a child who has a fat parent.

When we played team games we discussed and chose a way to make teams without leaving anyone until last. When bias incidents occurred, I intervened, being sure to tell the fat child she should not have to put up with

being harassed. When we performed a play about people from the past, I gave her the role of Sojourner Truth. She stood up proudly at our Saturday Outdoor Market and told everyone about this big amazing woman.

This child gained an incredible amount of self-esteem over the two years she was in my class. She is now very confident in social situations and is most often to be found in a leadership position. She also became more independent and very much more physically coordinated. She could often be seen running pell-mell across the playground, involved in some tag game. What a change from the child who used to sit down near the teacher to play with her stuffed animals everyday! As her confidence with physical skills developed, she was more willing to attempt new physical challenges. She even took a gymnastics class with us (a sport that is designed for small bodies) and enjoyed herself immensely, focusing on the feats she could accomplish.

Her classmates also gained by their experiences. They found confidence in themselves and respect for others of all sizes. They learned to empathize with fat people and to understand how much harassment hurts. They learned to respect each other; all of them could relax and enjoy their time together without being on guard against teasing, name-calling or exclusion. I hope they learned enough to keep them from perpetuating the harassment that fat people live with today. I hope that you can give these skills to the children you teach.

If you felt uncomfortable while reading this article, you may need to educate yourself further about this issue with our children. If you would like more information about fat people and the research being done on this subject, you can contact the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, P.O.

Box 188620, Sacramento, CA, 95818, or the Full Sun Institute at (503) 689-3947. For good photographs and articles about proud large women, try *Radiance* magazine, (510) 482-0680.

Trisha Whitney is a teacher and director at Drinking Gourd Elementary School in Eugene, Ore. Reprinted with permission from the author, from the OCAEYC Bulletin Vol. 30, No. 1, fall 1994.

Reprinted by the Early Childhood Equity Alliance with permission from The Web Journal