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Original article

Is weight-related bullying addressed in school-based anti-bullying programs?

L'intimidation à l'égard du poids est-elle considérée dans les programmes scolaires visant à contrer l'intimidation?

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – The high prevalence and numerous negative correlates of weight-related bullying among youth emphasize the need to prevent and counter this phenomenon in school settings. This scoping review aims at: (a) determining whether the anti-bullying programs identified in previous systematic reviews and meta-analyses take weight-related bullying into account, and (b) pinpointing effective intervention strategies against weight-related bullying.

Literature findings. – None of the 10 systematic reviews and meta-analyses retained addressed weight-related bullying directly. However, their findings highlighted some intervention strategies that may help prevent and reduce this type of bullying.

Discussion and conclusion. – The results underscore the need to consider weight-related bullying more closely in anti-bullying programs implemented in elementary, middle, and high schools. It is also important to target the intervention strategies most likely to lead to the prevention and reduction of weight-related bullying. Such strategies could include, for example: (a) education, training, and awareness-raising, for school personnel, concerning weight bias, norms and prejudices; and (b) social and emotional support for students who are victims of weight-related teasing or bullying.

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RÉSUMÉ

Introduction. – La prévalence élevée et les nombreux corrélats négatifs associés à l'intimidation par rapport au poids chez les jeunes mettent en évidence la nécessité d'identifier des stratégies d'intervention permettant de prévenir et de contrer ce phénomène en milieu scolaire. La présente recension exploratoire vise à : (a) déterminer si les programmes visant à contrer l'intimidation identifiés dans des recensions systématiques et des méta-analyses antérieures tiennent compte de l'intimidation à l'égard du poids ; (b) faire ressortir des stratégies d'intervention efficaces lorsqu'il est question d'intimidation par rapport au poids.

Données de la littérature. – Aucune des 10 recensions systématiques et méta-analyses retenues n'a directement considéré l'intimidation à l'égard du poids. Toutefois, les résultats et les conclusions de ces études font ressortir des stratégies d'intervention qui pourraient prévenir et réduire ce type d'intimidation.

Discussion et conclusion. – Les résultats obtenus soulignent l'importance de prendre davantage en compte l'intimidation à l'égard du poids dans les programmes anti-intimidation implantés dans les écoles primaires et secondaires. Il importe par ailleurs de cibler les stratégies d'intervention les plus susceptibles de conduire à la prévention et à la réduction de l'intimidation par rapport au poids. Ces stratégies pourraient inclure, par exemple : (a) de l'éducation, de la formation et des prises de conscience, chez le personnel scolaire, par rapport aux biais, aux normes et aux préjugés à l'égard du poids ; (b) du soutien social et émotionnel aux élèves victimes d'intimidation en raison de leur poids.

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Over the past decades, bullying, victimization, and teasing have received increased attention from the press, governments, schools and researchers (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Fu, Land, & Lamb, 2013). Bullying behaviors are typically defined as intentional or deliberate hurtful acts of aggression that are repeated (or at risk of being repeated) and that are characterized by a perceived power imbalance in the relationship between at least two persons: the bully and the victim (Carrera, DePalma, & Lemeiras, 2011; Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014; Vessey, DiFazio, & Strout, 2013). Bullying is considered to be the most prevalent form of violence in schools (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006), with up to 30% of school-age youth reporting bullying on a monthly basis (Bradshaw & Johnson, 2011; Shetgiri, Espelage, & Carroll, 2015). Direct or overt forms of bullying consist of intimidating and humiliating confrontations and behaviors, such as name calling, threats or physical aggression, which often occur in front of others (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Indirect forms of bullying tend to involve relational manipulation and subtler behaviors, such as rumor spreading or exclusion from a group (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Vessey et al., 2013).

Bullying stems from bias, negative stereotypes or prejudicial beliefs established early in life (Garnett et al., 2014; Puhl & King, 2013). When based on socially stigmatized characteristics, bullying has been labelled as bias- or stigma-based (Rosenthal et al., 2015). Several studies have highlighted individual-level risk factors for bullying and stigmatizing characteristics, such as intellectual abilities, sexual orientation, gender, race, physical disabilities, family income, and body weight (Azeredo, Rinaldi, de Moraes, Levy, & Menezes, 2015; Shetgiri et al., 2015). These characteristics elicit negative reactions (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993) and lead to labeling, stereotyping and unequal outcomes through devaluation, separation, status loss and discrimination (Crocker et al., 1993; Link & Phelan, 2001, 2006).

1. Weight stigma and weight-related bullying

As weight biases are commonly observed, considered socially acceptable, and rarely questioned (Puhl, Luedicke, & Heuer, 2011), overweight can be conceptualized as a specific form of stigma that is highly related to discrimination and stigma-based bullying behaviors (Garnett et al., 2014; Puhl & King, 2013; Rosenthal et al., 2015; van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014). Indeed, in youth, overweight is highly devaluated and has been associated with various negative and discriminatory attitudes, as well as stereotypes, such as being lazy, mean, unmotivated, or less competent (Gray, Simon, Janicke, & Dumont-Driscoll, 2011; Puhl & King, 2013). In fact, weight stigma has two dimensions: visibility and controllability (Crocker et al., 1993; Goffman, 1963). Visibility refers to the fact that others can easily identify overweight and obesity. Controllability suggests that, as opposed to other characteristics (e.g., race or gender), body weight is considered to be malleable and, consequently, overweight youth are perceived as being to blame for their excessive body weight (Crandall & Reser, 2005; Crocker et al., 1993; Escoto, Laska, Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Hannan, 2012).

Weight-related bullying is highly prevalent among youth around the world (Brixval, Rasmussen, Holstein, & Due, 2012; Due et al., 2009; Rosenthal et al., 2015; Shetgiri et al., 2015), and those who are overweight or obese are nearly two times more at risk of being bullied than their normal-weight peers (van Geel et al., 2014). While obese elementary children have a 63% higher risk of being bullied than their normal-weight peers (Puhl & King, 2013), one third of female adolescents and one fourth of male adolescents are bullied because of their weight (Olvera, Dempsey, Gonzalez, & Abrahamson, 2013; Puhl et al., 2011). In school settings, weight-related bullying is viewed by teachers as the most problematic form

of bullying (Puhl & King, 2013). The weight-related bullying behaviors most frequently observed in school include name calling and mean teasing (Puhl et al., 2011). Overweight and obese students can also be ignored, avoided, or excluded from social activities, and must deal with weight-related bullying in various school venues, such as gym class and the cafeteria (Puhl et al., 2011).

2. Correlates of weight-related bullying

In overweight and obese youth, weight-related bullying has been associated with physical, behavioral, psychosocial and academic problems (Puhl & King, 2013). Physical correlates of weight-related bullying include elevated blood pressure and increased risk of obesity (Puhl & King, 2013). Behavioral correlates (Olvera et al., 2013; Puhl & King, 2013) comprise reduced levels of physical activity and avoidance of physical education classes, as well as unhealthy weight loss methods (e.g., dieting) and disordered eating behaviors (e.g., binge eating or emotional eating and purging). Psychosocial correlates consist of a higher likelihood of depressive symptoms, anxiety, suicidal ideation and behaviors, and substance abuse, as well as lower self-esteem and body satisfaction (Eaton, Lowry, Brener, Galuska, & Crosby, 2005; Eisenberg & Neumark-Sztainer, 2008; Lunde, Frisén, & Hwang, 2006; Puhl & King, 2013; Puhl et al., 2011). Additionally, these youth can experience rejection, social isolation, and weaker social bonds (Puhl & King, 2013). Finally, academic correlates include lower school achievement, as well as higher school avoidance and absenteeism (Caird et al., 2011; Krukowski et al., 2009).

3. The present study

Previous findings on the prevalence and correlates of weight-related bullying suggest that this phenomenon represents a common and serious public health problem, which needs to be addressed. However, as recently pointed out by Puhl et al. (2015), weight-related bullying is overlooked in most state laws as well as in school-based anti-bullying programs. Accordingly, the first objective of this scoping review was to examine whether weight-related bullying is considered in international school-based anti-bullying programs that were previously synthesized in systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Such a broad analysis of the consideration for weight-related bullying in school-based anti-bullying programs constitutes a necessary first step. If this scoping review reveals that it is addressed, then a more detailed systematic assessment of the studies having evaluated the effects of the programs in question would be relevant. However, if it is not addressed, such evaluation will seem premature.

Additionally, a focus on systematic reviews and meta-analyses can provide relevant, synthesized information for schools and scholars on the most effective and most frequently used intervention strategies to prevent or reduce all forms of bullying in school settings. The strategies found to be effective could serve as guidelines for either designing a module and adding it to a current school-based anti-bullying program or for developing a specific school-based program targeting weight-related bullying. Therefore, the second objective was to pinpoint effective intervention strategies that could be used against weight-related bullying.

4. Method

A systematic electronic search was conducted in five databases [Academic Search Complete, Medline, PsycARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Scopus] with no year restriction imposed. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses were identified using all possible combinations of the following four groups of

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