**UConn CSCH Podcast Episode Transcript:**

**Using Peer Influence to Reduce Weight-Based Bullying**

Helene Marcy: Hello and Welcome to the CSCH Podcast. My name is Helene Marcy, Program Manager for the UConn Collaboratory on School and Child Health, or CSCH. The CSCH mission is to facilitate innovative and impactful connections across research, policy, and practice arenas to advance equity in school and child health. CSCH is committed to anti-racist work that prioritizes inclusion, reduces disparities, and creates systemic change. I invite you to take a look at our website at csch.uconn.edu.

Today I’m here with Leah Lessard. Leah is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity and teaches in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences. Her research focuses on how social experiences steer development during adolescence and today we’re going to talk about her research on youth facing weight stigma. Welcome, Leah.

Leah Lessard: Hello, thank you so much for having me today*.*

Helene: So let’s start with some general background about you. What sparked your interest in focusing on your general area of research?

Leah: So, my research interests really grew out of my time spent volunteering in middle and high schools while I was completing my undergraduate degree at the University of San Diego. And during this time, I was really able to observe classroom dynamics among teens, and I was struck by how much students’ academic behaviors and their performance was driven by their social experiences. So, for example, I noticed that students would stop raising their hand or participating after someone would tease them or call them a nerd or a know-it-all for correctly answering a question. And this interest in the academic implications of the social dynamics led me to graduate school at UCLA, where I learned more about the key role that peers play in adolescent development. And here I also conducted multiple studies where the results consistently highlighted damaging effects of peer mistreatment and exclusion on teens’ academic outcomes. Now things like friendlessness, peer rejection and bullying are often overlooked when thinking about under achievement during the secondary school years, but teens’ social and academic lives are really so highly intertwined. And seeing this play out again and again in study results,along with those earlier observations that I had, really turned my attention towards the social origins of academic disparities that have remained persistent across teens with stigmatized identities and attributes, who are disproportionately experiencing peer mistreatment in the school setting. So, for example, youth with higher body weight, sexual minorities and those with less economic privilege. And so the primary aim of my research is to really identify strategies to increase social inclusion broadly within the school setting as a way to reduce the disproportionate marginalization that youth with social stigmas experience.

Helene: So as I mentioned in the intro, we’re going to talk about your work on the effects of weight stigma in particular. Tell us a bit about more what you mean by weight stigma and what the effects can be.

Leah: Yes, so weight stigma is the societal devaluation or prejudice and marginalization of people with overweight and obesity. And among youth, weight stigma often comes in the form of teasing and bullying about body weight. And it's highly prevalent. So we know from research that body weight is actually the most common reason that youth—across racial and ethnic groups—are bullied in the school setting. And this is particularly concerning because there's such strong evidence that weight stigma has harmful academic and health consequences for youth. And these harmful effects are not only acute, but they also persist over time in ways that can contribute to longer term weight-based disparities. For example, in educational attainment as well as mental health distress. So, it's really important that we have a good sense of effective strategies to address and to reduce weight stigma earlier on in development. And particularly during the adolescent years, when there's this heightened sensitivity to social rejection and there's heightened concern for peer acceptance as well.

Helene: So you’re interested in the potential strategy of capitalizing on the influence of popular adolescents to combat weight stigma. Tell us more about that idea

Leah: Yes, so more than other developmental periods, during adolescence there's this heightened susceptibility to peer influence. So, teens are super in tune to what the cool or popular kids are doing, and they'll modify their behaviors to be in line with this in order to make sure that they're accepted, that they fit in, and they don't find themselves ostracized or excluded. Now, a common misconception is that peer influence is always negative. And thismay be because peer influence is often studied or talked about in the context of drug use, risk-taking behaviors, or academic disengagement and slacking off. But there's also a flip side to this too. So, if the cool kids are going out of their way to befriend someone who is sitting alone in the cafeteria, or if they're standing up against bullying behavior, then these positive behaviors are likely to be modeled and adopted, diffused across the peer system. So, along these lines of positive peer influence, there have been school-based interventions that have successfully reduced overall aggressive behaviors by training the most influential or popular kids to openly disapprove of hostile behavior and reward prosocial behaviors. So, building off of this idea and these findings, we were interested in whether positive peer influence could also be applied as a way to reduce negative weight biases and weight-based bullying among adolescents.

Helene: I understand that this spring and summer you’ve been focusing on a study based on that idea of the influence of popular peers. Tell us about how the study was done.

Leah: Yes, so during the pandemic, we conducted a study of 452 adolescents who were aged 11 to 17 years old, and the teens completed an online questionnaire, assessing their peer relationships and their experiences with different types of bias-based bullying, including weight-based bullying. To test our hypothesis about the potential role of peer influence and how that could play a role in reducing negative weight-related attitudes and bullying, the survey also included a social norm-based experiment. And the experiment aimed to assess the efficacy of various social referents at school in reducing adolescents’ weight-biased attitudes, and the potential of increasing bystander intervention during instances of weight-

based bullying at school.So our teen participants were randomly assigned to readhypotheticalbullying scenarios in which a social referent at school—either an adult, a classmate in general, or a popular peer—either positively intervened during weight-based bullying, (for example, confronting the bullies, telling them to quit it when weight-based bullying was happening), or comfort the victims (such as providing emotional support, asking the victim if they're okay). So we contrasted this positive intervention to no intervention at all. So scenarios where the social referents just watched the bullying, ignored it and did nothing, which in a sense conveys a sense of endorsement or approval of the behavior.

Helene: And what did you find?

Leah: We found the strongest support for our hypotheses in terms of teens’ reported intentions to intervene during instances of weight-based bullying. So teens who read about another individual positively intervening during a weight-based bullying scenario indicated being more likely to tell bullies to quit it, quit the weight-based bullying compared to those who were exposed to bystanders who did nothing and ignored the situation. And these effects of positive intervention were strongest when the individual who was intervening was a popular, or a cool peer as compared to a classmate in general or an adult. And these added benefits of positive intervention from popular peers were also related to increased likelihood of providing support to the target of weight-based bullying. And so these initial results are certainly promising, but it's also important to note that many of our findings were also null, meaning that in some cases there was no impact of exposure to positive intervention. And this this was particularly the case in the context of teens’ weight bias attitudes, which overall did not appear to be affected by the social influence experiment. So, it's possible that weight-related stereotypes and prejudice are more resistant to change than behavioral actions and reducing these, these weight biases may require repeated and perhaps more intensive intervention to make headway in that context.

Helene: So tell us about the implications of this initial research. Why is this important?

Leah: This research is important, because it begins to consider strategies to reduce weight stigma among adolescents. So there has been foundational research in the area that has documented the prevalence and the consequences of weight stigma for youth this age, which I mentioned earlier, but far less is known about how to minimize the stigma that youth experience related to body weight, including teens’ overall negative attitudes and beliefs about their peers with high weight. And so our initial findings suggest that not all individuals are equally positioned to positively influence teens’ responses to weight-based bullying and that positive support of behaviors from peers at the top of the social hierarchy—those who are popular and cool—may be particularly impactful. And so based on this, school-based weight stigma reduction interventions that focus attention on training the most influential peers—those who are considered cool and most popular—to publicly disapprove of weight-based mistreatment may see larger benefits compared to interventions that broadly target all peers or rely on adults to deliver weight stigma-related messages.

But still, it's important to emphasize that our findings are only preliminary and ongoing analyses are being conducted to get a sense of whether there may be developmental differences here. For example, whether the peer influence effects may be more robust among middle school versus high school age students. And we're also currently replicating the online survey and experiment with a second, demographically more diverse sample of 1200 teens to get a sense of the robustness and the generalizability of these findings. And we'll need to consider several follow up studies before developing scalable interventions.

Helene: It will be really interesting to see how the research unfolds and what it says about this strategy. I’m looking forward to learning about the results based on the larger sample as well. Leah, tell us how listeners can keep up to date on the progress of your research project.

Leah: Sure, so updates on our weight stigma research can be found on the UConn Rudd Center website and social media accounts. There's also an option to sign up for the Center’s newsletter to receive monthly email updates. And I also keep active publication links on my website and post brief research summary updates on my Twitter account.

Helene: We will add links to Leah’s work in the podcast description. Thank you so much for joining us today to talk about your work.

Leah: Thank you so much. It was a pleasure to talk today.

Helene: And a reminder to our listeners that you can find information about Leah and all of our affiliates at the CSCH website, csch.uconn.edu. You can also follow us on social media @UConnCSCH. Thanks for listening.