

Children's Weight: Language Guide

Purpose

To support compassionate, non-stigmatising communication that frames weight as influenced by societal, environmental, and structural factors shifting the focus away from individual blame.

Use Person-First Language

- ✓ *Children living with overweight / obesity*
- ✗ *Obese children or overweight children*

Why: Person-first language respects the child as an individual and avoids defining them by a condition.

Frame Weight as a Condition, Not an Identity

- ✓ *A child living with a health condition influenced by their environment*
- ✗ *A child is obese*

Why: Reinforces that weight is shaped by multiple factors & not a personal failing.

Avoid Judgmental or Emotive Terms

- ✗ "Crisis," "epidemic," "burden," "blame," "fight against obesity"
- ✓ "Health challenge," "area of concern," "priority for action"

Why: These terms can shame families and shut down engagement.

Talk About Systems, Not Just Individuals

- ✓ "Children are growing up in environments that make healthy choices difficult"
- ✗ "Children don't exercise enough / eat too much"

Why: Shifts focus to the wider determinants of health like food access, poverty, urban design, advertising.

Be Inclusive & Equity-Focused

- ✓ "Children in low-income communities face more barriers to healthy living"
- ✓ "We all have a role in shaping healthier environments"

Why: Shows this is a fairness issue, not just a health one.

Use Empowering, Future-Focused Language

- ✓ "There is an opportunity to support children to thrive"
- ✓ "Creating healthier communities benefits everyone"

Why: Encourages hope, engagement, and shared responsibility.

Summary

Instead of...**Try saying...**

Obese child

Child living with obesity

Weight crisis

Health challenge / public health issue

Fight obesity

Improve children's environments

Bad habits

Barriers to healthy choices

Parents to blame

Families need support from systems

References

- [5 tips for communicating about children's health and food - FrameWorks UK](#)
- [Reframing how we talk about children's health and food - Impact on Urban Health](#)
- [How to talk about the building blocks of health | The Health Foundation](#)
- [Shifting the Narrative on Childhood Overweight & Obesity | UNICEF](#)
- [Shifting the Narrative on Childhood Overweight & Obesity: A new playbook for effective advocacy.pdf](#)
- [Respectful Language and Care in Childhood Obesity - PMC](#)