



Weighing options for childhood weight loss

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(CNN) -- Nathan Ruffin and Shawna Rubbeck know what it's like to be teased about their weight.

"People would call me cupcake as a joke, and I would just sort of laugh about it, 'cause I knew I couldn't do anything about it," says 14-year-old Shawna.

Ruffin, now 13, was a 2-pound preemie. He began putting on the pounds in grade school, overeating he says in response to the stress of being teased. He remembers one day in particular.

"I think I ate two packs of noodles and a hot dog, and chips and dinner. That was a lot to eat that day," he recalls.

Ruffin and Rubbeck knew they had to get control of their weight and address the associated health risks like adult onset diabetes and heart disease. With the help of their families, they applied for scholarships to Wellspring Adventure Camp, a weight loss camp and one of many options for the growing number of overweight children.

"My whole family just jumped in on it and we all just started working on it, like we gotta get him in here, we gotta get him in here," said Nathan's mother Sharon Ruffin.

Nathan and Shawna are just two of millions of Americans struggling with weight issues.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey data from 1999-2002, 16 percent of children and teens aged 6 to 19 are overweight -- triple the amount from 1980. Further, data showed that an estimated 65 percent of adults in the United States are either overweight or obese.

Shaping up at camp

Upon arrival at Wellspring, designed for children 11 to 16 years old who are at least 20 pounds overweight, counselors check for hidden food, ensuring campers don't sneak snacks and undermine the program.

Campers eat measured portions, take morning walks, compile journals that monitor their food intake and attend counseling sessions four times per week.

Besides the health benefits, fitness camps might help overweight children avoid feeling singled out, according to Alice Ammerman, an associate professor in the department of nutrition at the University of North Carolina.

"It sometimes can be stigmatizing with intervention, especially if it's part of an after school program or something, if it's set up in a way that it's 'only the fat kids that go,'" she says.

Shawna finds her comfort zone at camp, bonding with others facing the same physical and psychological issues.

"I know that because they're [fellow campers] overweight and have been teased, and are struggling with it and are here for the same reason that I am, that they're not going to tease me because I'm fat," she said.

Another plus, Ammerman said, is that camps are most often voluntary. Children attend because they are serious about tackling their weight problem.

Camps aren't the only option available for young, overweight Americans.

For example, the William J. Clinton Foundation and American Heart Association launched an initiative in May aimed to "stop the increasing prevalence of childhood obesity" in the United States by 2010. ([Full story](#))

The plan emphasizes proper diet and exercise at an early age, so that children will grow up to be healthy adults and reduce obesity-related health costs. The two groups will also work with the food and restaurant industry, target its media message and push for more physical activity and healthier lunches in schools.

The CDC, with its State-Based Nutrition and Physical Activity Program to Prevent Obesity and Other Chronic Diseases, has also pitched in by funding obesity prevention programs for children and adults.

In North Carolina, one of seven states that has implemented these measures, the "Eat Smart, Move More" program targets families and prompts them to eat more healthily and engage in more everyday physical activity.

Twenty-one other states are currently gathering data to start their own state-based obesity prevention programs.

Life after camp

After four weeks of journaling, counseling, eating right and learning not to use food as a crutch, Nathan shed 19.5 pounds and Shawna lost 23. She said she also gained confidence, even at the two-week mark, when she had lost just 13 pounds.

"Before I didn't really like mirrors, I didn't like what was looking back at me. I love to look in the mirror now because I really think I'm pretty," she said.

The real test will come when they return home, away from the environment they've grown accustomed to and firm structure of camp where they were compelled to be active and eat right.

Jeffrey Solomon, executive director of the National Camp Association, said that many weight loss camps deal with this wild card by continuing the learning process for campers and their families through the Internet.

"[Communicating] helps a lot to continually give the kids positive reinforcement and often to involve the families as well in providing kids with diets and things that they can take home to help the family become more educated and to reinforce that change in lifestyle that's necessary if a child's gonna continue making progress of losing and maintaining a proper weight level," said Solomon.

Dr. Nancy Krebs, co-chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics' obesity panel, also stresses the importance of building new healthy behaviors into the family's routines.

"There's kind of reinforcement for at least for the younger kids to be around their parents ..." she says, "... but it is this message that you don't just sit in front of the TV or computer all day long."

Nathan is already thinking ahead, saying that he hopes to include his mother and sister in his new lifestyle.

"At home, I'm going to ask my mom or two older sisters to maybe do a little workout once in awhile or maybe help me cook once in awhile," he said.