

VICTORIA ADVOCATE

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Kids can gain insight at new summer weight loss camp

Behavioral approach proves successful elsewhere, staff says

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BY GABE SEMENZA - VICTORIA ADVOCATE

If you struggle with an overweight child - part of the first generation in 200 years to potentially have a shorter lifespan than his or her parents - a possible and atypical solution will be available close to home this summer.

A national company that treats overweight youth has announced the establishment of Wellspring Texas in San Marcos, the state's first summer weight loss camp of its kind. The camp - already implemented in a handful of other states, such as North Carolina - is a "therapeutic boarding school" for overweight youth, company literature notes.

"Our programs are the first weight loss programs ever in which kids maintain weight loss after they go home," said Ryan Craig in a telephone conversation Friday. Craig is the president of Healthy Living Academies, the organization that founded these camps.

Texas, he's quick to note, ranks high nationally in childhood obesity rates. In 2004, between 36 and 42 percent of school age children here were overweight or obese.

This is part of the reason for launching the Texas camp, which is open to 12-through 17-year-olds, Craig said.

"This will become the standard of care for kids," the man said. "Surgery is not the answer for kids. Our focus is on changing behavior. If you don't change behavior, students return home and gain weight. We teach self-regulatory behaviors."

The camps are staffed by psychologists and social workers, among other professionals. Kids are taught through a combination of cognitive-behavioral therapy and an introduction to healthy eating habits and exercises.

Craig said kids can expect to lose 4 to 5 pounds per week while enrolled, and up to 8 pounds in the year following the camp.

Dr. William Campbell, a Victoria preventive cardiologist, treats many whose unhealthy lifestyles have led them to adult heart problems. He said he's never heard of this camp and thus can't comment on it.

But he said he knows the causes for obesity.

"We eat a lot of fast food now," Campbell said. "The world has become very sedentary, between the video games and TV and lack of physical education in school. Kids have an unlimited amount of calories and a decrease in caloric burning."

Dr. Daniel Kirschenbaum, a professor at Northwestern University Medical School and the clinical director for Healthy Living Academies, said in a release that the Wellspring camps focus on "weight loss through diet and activity management, but also address the psychological and emotional issues that often prevent successful weight loss ..."

Activities include team sports, swimming, personal training and aerobics, to name a few.

Craig said registration has begun. The first session begins June 10. The camp offers four- and eight-week sessions. Four weeks cost \$5,350 but the behavioral portion of the camp is covered by most insurance providers, Craig said.

For those who don't have insurance, the man said, "We have a student loan program for families in Texas." He added that efforts are under way to garner funding for scholarships, which would give those kids deemed worthy the chance to attend.

"The evidence is out there that the problem doesn't get better," Craig said. "If it doesn't get better, it gets worse."

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