

St. Petersburg Times

Help kids prevent summertime weight gain

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In Print: Thursday, May 21, 2009

Ah, summertime. No school, no pressure, plenty of time to play outdoors.

A perfect time for an overweight child to start getting in shape, right?

But it's not so simple, says Dr. Denise Edwards, assistant professor of internal medicine and pediatrics and director of the University of South Florida's Healthy Weight Clinic.

"Summertime is actually a bad time as far as weight goes for kids," Edwards said. "I thought summer would be better because they could be more active, but it's usually the opposite. They're not on a set schedule so they can eat all the time. They're not as active as you'd expect because it's hot. So kids end up gaining weight."

Prevent extra pounds

Edwards says parents can help prevent this weight gain by keeping sweet, high-calorie foods out of the house.

"Sure, you can have chips and ice cream around and then tell kids not to eat them, but it's easier to not have them around," she said. "Parents should fill the house with healthy snacks. Don't even have sugary drinks around. Also, parents should encourage kids to be as active as possible. Take them to parks, take them on bike rides. Parents need to be role models, especially for young children. If the parents are active, then the kids are more likely to be active."

Signing children up for summer activities such as day camps and arts programs sponsored by YMCAs, parks, museums and recreation centers will help keep them active and away from the TV, video games and the fridge.

And look for new ways to get the entire family outdoors and active, such as an outing on the Pinellas Trail or at Fort De Soto Park. There's nothing like camaraderie to help a child realize his goals.

The camp option

If you think your child needs more focused help losing weight, you might consider a summer camp devoted to that task.

These camps have been around for decades, promising dramatic weight loss in a controlled environment.

"The old weight-loss camps had no cognitive behavioral therapy," said Dr. Daniel Kirschenbaum, clinical director of Wellspring, a national treatment program for overweight children that operates a summer camp in St. Petersburg.

"Our focus is on developing relationships between the staff and the clients — on getting to know the clients, on leading them through a change in perspective about the way they eat. We use techniques for maximizing the kids' motivation and managing their emotions."

Kirschenbaum, who was an overweight child himself, brings an evangelist's zeal to weight control. In his book, *The 9 Truths About Weight Loss: The No-Tricks, No-Nonsense Plan for Lifelong Weight Control*, he offers no shortcuts or soothing promises. The diet he has devised for campers stresses low-fat foods, low-caloric density foods such as soups, vegetables, salads and fruits, and little sugar.

Children at Wellspring camps learn to keep food diaries, which Kirschenbaum considers essential for losing weight.

Victoria Tycholis of Tampa will be attending the Wellspring camp in St. Petersburg for four weeks starting in June. The 16-year-old isn't entirely thrilled by the idea, "but I know it's for my own good," she said.

"It's a little embarrassing when my friends ask me what I'm doing this summer. I just say I'm going to a wellness camp to learn how to be healthy."

She wouldn't mind losing about 15 pounds, but says weight loss isn't her main reason for attending.

"I'm going to pick up some good tips so I can take better care of myself," she said.

Victoria's mother, Dianna Tycholis Sheppard, started researching summer camps for her daughter after seeing the results of a wellness program at her workplace, Advantec in Tampa. A group of 36 employees lost a total of more than 1,000 pounds in a year, "and it was so much easier to do together," said Sheppard, CEO of Advantec.

She settled on Wellspring for her daughter because of its emphasis on healthy living rather than just weight loss.

"I looked at seven, and this one seemed to be the most well-rounded," she said. "It's not just about weight loss and health, but also about sports, bonding, discussions.

"Obviously weight loss is important for any child in terms of self-esteem and health, but a camp should be about more than that."

Fast facts

Obesity in children

- In 1976, 6 percent of teens were obese.
- In 2006, 18 percent of teens were obese.
- 70 percent of obese children have at least one risk factor for cardiovascular disease, including high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and abnormal glucose tolerance (a diabetes precursor).
- 39 percent of obese children had two or more cardiovascular disease risk factors.
- More risks of childhood obesity: asthma, sleep apnea, type 2 diabetes, social discrimination, continued weight problems into adulthood.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Resources

Healthy Weight Clinic at the University of South Florida: a multidisciplinary clinic with programs for children, adolescents and adults. (813) 259-8700.

Weight Watchers: The popular weight-loss program offers many meetings in the Tampa Bay area, plus an online option. There are special food plans for teens. www.weightwatchers.com.

Lifestyle Family Fitness opens all its locations to teens ages 12 to 17 each summer for free. Register at www.lff.com/teen.

Wellspring operates Wellspring Florida, a camp for children 11-18 in St. Petersburg. Toll-free 1-866-364-0808. Its Web site (wellspringflorida.com) includes scholarship information.

New Image Camps operates Camp Vanguard on Lake Pierce in Haines City, between Tampa and Orlando, for children 7-19. Toll-free 1-800-365-0556 or www.newimagecamp.com/camp-vanguard.html.

Web resources

Centers for Disease Control's Healthy Weight: Web site offers information and guidance for all ages: cdc.gov/healthyweight.

Tone Teen: a Web site that educates children and teens about health and fitness:
toneteen.com.

Spark Teens: Web site with tools such as a calorie counter, support groups, fitness programs, exercise demos. teens.sparkpeople.com.

4 Teen Weight: A Web site with resources, articles and quizzes. www.4teenweightloss.com.

Livestrong.com: Lance Armstrong's free Web site includes free food and fitness advice, plus a free calorie-tracking program. www.livestrong.com.

Books

- *Weight Loss Confidential.* Anne M. Fletcher, whose *Thin For Life* chronicled tips from 100 people who lost and kept off 30 pounds or more, turns her attention to teens.
- *I'm, Like, So Fat!* Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, who conducted the EAT (Eating Among Teens) study, discusses how parents can instill healthy habits in teens.