

## A healthy attitude

### Camps teach youths about nutrition, fitness

BY DAVID QUICK

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Camps to help overweight children shed pounds have been around for years, but as the childhood obesity epidemic gets worse, are retooled fitness camps a possible strategy in combating it?

Some local health and fitness experts seem to think so.

"I don't think kids have been getting the tools they need to eat well, exercise and take care of themselves," says Judith Herrin, a registered dietitian and nutrition counselor at the Medical University of South Carolina.

Herrin will join Janis Newton, MUSC's aerobics and training director, and other staffers to help conduct three, one-week sessions of the university's second annual Fit Kids Camp in June.

Newton has directed a fitness camp for youngsters in years past, but revised it to focus on overweight children last year. The day camp addresses not only exercise, but nutrition and the emotional aspects of eating and exercise.

"There's so much in the news these days about youth being inactive and overweight," says Newton. "Kids think it's their parent's job to look after their health. We want to give them, and their parents, the power to look after themselves. ... They need to know that taking care of their body, mind and spirit is part of their sacred life."

Dr. Will Johnson, a psychology professor at The Citadel who has a background in studying childhood obesity and eating disorders, is conducting a four-week camp geared toward overweight and obese children called The Citadel Crescent Camp. The camp is based on a similar one he conducted for years at the University of Mississippi. He called the camp "tried and tested."

Johnson says one of the complexities of the childhood obesity epidemic lies in the fact that the population of overweight and obese children, and adults, has grown.

"One of the problems we have now is that being overweight is normal," says Johnson. "People are reluctant to recognize it as a problem because so many other people also are overweight."

Louis Yuhasz, perhaps the area's most vocal proponent of fighting childhood obesity, says another aspect of the relative normalization of childhood obesity is that parents increasingly are overweight themselves and may not serve as good role models or see the fact that their children are obese as a problem they can deal with.

"You can't tell Suzy to go outside and ride her bicycle while you're sitting inside watching a Tivo-d segment of 'Oprah,'" says Yuhasz, who raises money to send obese children to nationally recognized Wellspring Camps. "At camp, it's about empowerment and taking control of your life. ... We can't drill the information into these kids enough."

#### The facts

The childhood obesity epidemic is fairly new turf in the worlds of nutrition, fitness and psychology because it has taken place in just a little more than a generation.

Since the 1970s, the childhood obesity rate in the United States has doubled for children ages 2-5 and for adolescents ages 12-19. Worse yet, the rate has tripled for children ages 6-11. Estimates in 2002 put the population of obese children ages 6 and older at 9 million.

Newer data shows that the rate has increased since the year 2000.

Researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a study in the April 5 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association saying that the rate of children who were overweight increased from 13.9 percent in 2000 to 17.1 percent in 2004.

And the International Journal of Pediatric Obesity recently published a report about studies that indicate nearly half of the children in North and South America will be overweight by 2010.

Being overweight or obese is more than an aesthetic or social issue. Overweight children are at risk for serious health conditions, such as type II diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, all once considered exclusively adult diseases.

Several factors provided fertile ground for the epidemic. Conventional suburban and city designs have discouraged walking and biking. Government budget cuts have trimmed physical education and some sports from school programs. Busy families often are turning to the convenience and perceived affordability of processed and fast food. And kids often opt for watching TV or playing video games rather than playing outside.

Some major retailers feature rotund families or models in advertisements and commercials.

### **One solution?**

So it's no wonder that researchers, governments, nonprofits, schools and parents are searching for solutions. The latest came last week when a plan was unveiled to eliminate nondiet soft drinks from most public schools by the 2008-09 school year. Some states are starting to require physical education as well.

Could "fit camps" be another means of attacking the problem?

The campers may learn to control eating habits, learn about proper portions, improve their nutrition and increase their physical activity with regular exercise.

"If you can help a child understand his or her body, you can change their life," says Alicia O'Connor, an exercise physiologist who is helping with the MUSC Fit Kids Camp.

But evidence shows that, unless the home environment changes, a child returning from a fitness camp to a home filled with junk food and a sedentary lifestyle is nearly doomed to failure. That's why the MUSC and Citadel camps, as well as the Wellspring camps, have components that involve the parents and siblings.

"It really has to be a family effort," says The Citadel's Johnson. "You can't change the kid without changing the environment he's growing up in."

Newton agrees, noting that during and after the camp, parents are asked to make changes such as not having soft drinks in the house.

### **Happy campers**

Campers and parents in last year's MUSC camp gave it high marks.

Michael Garovich of Sullivan's Island and Emily Sassard of West Ashley went through the camps last year and still carry out the lessons learned in their everyday lives. However, the parents of Michael and Emily both showed interest in nutrition and participated in physical activities before and after the camp.

Eleven-year-old Michael has a fraternal twin, Parker, who weighs about 70 pounds. Though Michael is fairly active, he weighs more. His parents note that he's been taking a growth hormone since age 3 because doctors noticed his growth had leveled off. Garovich's father, Dr. Michael Garovich, says that pediatricians and endocrinologists both insist that the growth hormone has nothing to do with his son's weight.

One of the major changes Michael made after the camp was switching to diet soft drinks.

The Garoviches send their boys to numerous camps each summer and note that besides the Anthony Johnson Basketball Camp on the Isle of Palms, the only other camp Michael raved about and wanted to go back to this year was the Fit Kids Camp.

Emily, an accomplished violinist, says she realized the importance of participating in activities such as tennis and swimming as a result of the camp, has cut out candy and tries to substitute water for soft drinks. She adds that camp showed her how tasty foods, such as a taco, can be made healthier by using different ingredients without losing flavor.

"I really do eat healthier now," says Emily. "I think it was better to hear these lessons from people other than my parents."

For Emily's mother, Jacky Sassard, the camp helped convince Emily that eating healthy food was good.

"We've never been a family to have sodas and potato chips laying around, but she was exposed to children who did. ... It always helps to have someone outside of the home to reinforce healthy eating habits."

### **Camps for kids**

--The Medical University of South Carolina's Fit Kids Camp will offer three, five-day sessions (June 12-16, June 19-23 and June 26-30) at the Harper Student Center, 45 Courtenay Drive, for children ages 9-13 who are "slightly overweight and somewhat sedentary." Each session will be held 9 a.m.-noon Monday through Friday. The cost is \$150 per session, which will be limited to 16 participants. Contact Janis Newton at 792-4141 or [newtonj@musc.edu](mailto:newtonj@musc.edu).

--The Citadel Crescent Camp is a four-week day camp designed to help educate overweight children ages 7-16 and their families about healthy eating and exercising habits. The camp will be held 8:30 a.m.-3 p.m. weekdays June 5-30 at The Citadel. The cost of the camp is \$1,000 per participant. A minimum of 15 participants will be required for the camp to be held. The camp is capable of having up to 85 participants.

--Louie's Kids is a Charleston-based organization that raises money for scholarships for children to attend the Wellspring Adventure Camp in Green Cove, N.C. **Wellspring, which is run by Healthy Living Academies, is considered to be among the most effective summer programs for weight loss in the United States.** To apply for a scholarship, go to [www.LouiesKids.org](http://www.LouiesKids.org) or call 343-5746.

### **What's overweight or obese?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend the use of the Body Mass Index or BMI, to screen children and teens ages 2-19 for being overweight or obese.

The BMI is a number calculated from a person's weight and height. While it doesn't measure body fat nor is it a diagnostic tool, it is a reliable indicator of body fatness for children, teens and adults.

Although the BMI number is calculated the same way for children and adults, the criteria used to interpret the meaning of the BMI number for children and teens are different from those used for adults. For children and teens, BMI age- and sex-specific percentiles are used for two reasons: First, the amount of body fat changes with age; second, the amount of body fat differs between girls and boys.

The best way to calculate your child's BMI and to plot it on a percentile chart is to go to the CDC's Web site, enter "BMI children" into the search, and then click on "Child and Teen BMI Calculator."

### **Advice for parents**

To help your children maintain a healthy body weight, try these approaches:

--Be supportive. Children know if they are overweight and don't need to be reminded or singled out. They need acceptance, encouragement and love.

--Set guidelines for the amount of time your children can spend watching television or playing video games.

--Plan family activities that involve exercise. Instead of watching TV, go hiking or biking, wash the car or walk around a mall. Offer choices and let your children decide.

--Be sensitive. Find activities your children will enjoy that aren't difficult or could cause embarrassment.

--Eat meals together as a family and eat at the table, not in front of a television. Eat slowly and enjoy the food.

--Don't use food as a reward or punishment. Children should not be placed on restrictive diets unless done so by a doctor (for medical reasons). Children need food for growth, development and energy.

--Involve your children in meal planning and grocery shopping. This helps them learn and gives them a role in the decisionmaking.

--Keep healthy snacks on hand. Good options include fresh, frozen or canned fruits and vegetables; low-fat cheese, yogurt or ice cream; frozen fruit juice bars; and cookies such as fig bars, graham crackers, gingersnaps or vanilla wafers.

--Focus on small, gradual changes in eating and activity patterns. This helps form habits that can last a lifetime.