



The hard path to combat obesity

Fat nation?

The TV show *Teen Fit Camp* is a part *Biggest Loser*, part documentary. Is weight-loss TV the only way forward for our overweight kids? Kate Fitzpatrick finds out...

It says something about Australian society when the latest reality TV show to hit our screens ships six overweight and obese Australian teenagers to a weight-loss camp in the United States. It reinforces the alarming stats we hear so often they've ceased to mean anything – half of adults overweight or obese, one quarter of teenagers in the same category, the fastest growing childhood obesity rates in the world. *Teen Fit Camp* tackles the problem by sending these teens to a US weight-loss camp with excellent results and sound practises, but why is there this epidemic in the first place and who is to blame?

It's a hot issue that has social, emotional, political and economic implications. We take a look at three of the major stakeholders

– parents, kids themselves and the government – and look at their role and responsibilities in this very important issue.

SUSPECT # 1:

The parents

Blaming the parents seems to be the response of choice for politicians and the media when it comes to childhood obesity. 'I think it's really unfortunate that much of the public debate puts all the responsibility on parents and doesn't make any effort to help them,' says Melissa Sweet, author of *The Big Fat Conspiracy* (\$32.95, ABC Books) a new Australian book that argues the childhood obesity epidemic is caused by broader social factors. She believes that even parents with the best intentions for their children's health are railroaded by powerful marketing messages. 'Parents are up against a huge well-funded campaign to encourage kids to eat junk food. It's a David versus Goliath battle,' says Melissa.

The parents' cause isn't helped by recent research that links childhood obesity rates to both single and working mothers. A study

published in June in the *Medical Journal Of Australia* found having an overweight or single mother increases the likelihood of a child being overweight or obese. Similarly, US research singles out working mothers – finding the longer the hours a mother worked, the greater obesity risk for her children. 'It seems very unfair to blame parents of children for being swept downstream [into obesity], when so many powerful interests are working towards exactly that result,' believes Melissa. Among these powerful interests are the food industry who advertise junk food without restriction during children's TV viewing hours. A recent Green party attempt to ban this type of advertising was opposed in parliament by all the major political parties – despite recently published statistics showing 86% of parents support the ban.

But Melissa Sweet does concede that there exists a 'cotton wool culture' where children are overprotected and therefore miss out on active pursuits that kept kids of previous generations from being obese – riding their bike to school and playing footy in

the street for example. However, she argues that this stems from fear that is a product of a consciousness pedalled from the top down by politicians and other influential people.

SUSPECT # 2:

The kids

A child who is obese has a 25-50% chance of being an overweight adult. If you are an overweight adolescent, this figure jumps to 78%. Clearly it's imperative to stop the obesity epidemic so that things start to change for our kids. Ryan Craig, director of Wellspring Family Camp (the weight-loss camp currently featured in Network Ten's *Teen Fit Camp*), says being an overweight child can be the start of a vicious cycle that poses lifelong challenges to their health and happiness. '80-90% of the kids we work with have low self-esteem, depression and eat as a coping mechanism to deal with those feelings. It just cycles,' says Ryan.

In the past the 'fat kid' at school was simply dismissed as being lazy or gluttonous. Not so anymore – Ryan says dodgy biology and environmental factors are the key problems for today's kids. 'These kids have been dealt a poor hand from a biology that is compromised. A generation ago they would have been mildly overweight but today they are obese because of our obeseogenic environment,' Ryan argues. Like Melissa Sweet, he cites the drop in activity levels as a contributing factor and adds that portion sizes, calorie-dense food and beverages and the rise of fast food all add to the problem. However, his camp doesn't simply put these kids on a diet: the program focuses on psychological issues and uses cognitive behavioural therapy to alter negative patterns, aid stress management and to work through the emotional issues which contribute to their weight gain. 'I've learnt a lot while I was there which has helped me stay off stupid fad diets. I know now what's right to do and what's not right,' says *Teen Fit Camp* participant Gemma, 16.

On the good news front, Ryan believes it's easier to get through to kids to help them take control of their weight and change their mental space to something more positive. 'When you have someone who has been living with significant excess weight for years, it exacts a psychological toll. Whereas children and adolescents are more adaptable and less set in their ways,' he says.

SUSPECT # 3:

The government

'We knew the harms of tobacco decades before public health advocates persuaded governments to take action,' points out Melissa. Until then, governments remained hands-off using the excuse that it was all about choice. It's a line the current federal government uses now – health minister Tony Abbott believes 'it's up to the people who are out there in the marketplace to exercise appropriate discipline... if parents are too weak willed to resist [pester power] it's going

groundswell is being represented on the small screen with TV shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *Teen Fit Camp*. It will take time but governments should one day catch up with public sentiment. And it's not just about banning junk food advertising – Melissa adds that governments need to provide better public transport, more family-friendly housing developments and to fund targeted programs. As it stands now, 'food advertisers are spending close to 70 times more money on food ads than the Government spends on promoting an active lifestyle,' says Greens leader Bob Brown.

'70 times more money is spent on food ads than the government spends of active lifestyle promotion'

to be very hard for governments to step in.' However when the government stepped in to regulate tobacco (limiting places people could smoke, banning tobacco advertising etc), smoking rates dropped drastically.

It's a pattern Melissa Sweet hopes to see repeated with obesity. The grass roots movement has already started – Melissa's book is full of anecdotes about parents creating change, even something as small as banning sugary cereals from daycare. This



'Being overweight has held me back'

Gemma, 16, is a student from Queensland. She applied for *Teen Fit Camp* because at 110kg, she 'was so desperate to lose weight.'

'I have been overweight since I was about four years old. I started off as a big child but I gained weight very rapidly when I was young because I ate a little too much and didn't exercise enough. Then it got to the

The future

The New England Journal Of Medicine reported that this generation will be the first with a lesser life expectancy than their parents. But change is on the horizon but it will be slow and will come from the community, rather than from governments. It's also an issue that has a strong synchronicity with climate change (if we used our cars less we'd be slimmer and also greener) and is of equal urgency because we all want to live long, happy lives.

point when I was in grade four that I didn't have just one or two kilos to lose anymore, I had 10-20 kilos to lose. When I got to high school I gained a lot more. Since then I've lost weight on some stupid fad diets and then put it back on again.

I've always been an incredibly outgoing person, so I never found it hard to fit in. But I never wanted to go shopping with my friends because I was too embarrassed. Being overweight has held me back from a lot of things – like when we went to a Blue Light Disco I always felt uncomfortable and much uglier than the other girls, so I could never fit in. Clothes were a big thing, I was shopping the women's section when I was 10 years old. I was very happy with what I lost on the camp but I haven't reached my goal weight yet. I learnt so much and it was the best experience of my life. I didn't regret a single thing about it.' *Teen Fit Camp* airs on Channel 10, Sundays at 12pm.