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A Summer Camp For Losers

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Illustration: Tim Bower for Newsweek

Priscilla Marquard wanted to set herself and her three daughters on a lifelong course of healthy eating. Marquard was about 10 pounds overweight, and her daughters, 12-year-old triplets, were “beginning to pudge up.” So she brought them to the Pritikin Family Program in Aventura, Fla., a two-week weight-loss camp for parents and kids (pritikin.com). The family had such a good time playing tennis, running on the beach and learning to make healthy tacos in cooking class they hardly noticed they were shedding pounds. Last December, Marquard’s daughters chose a return trip to the weight-loss camp over a family vacation in Barbados.

Since many families put on weight together, it makes sense to lose it together. Program options include high-end camps like Pritikin (two weeks cost \$6,500 for adults and \$2,500 for kids, sometimes partly covered by insurance), as well as less expensive outpatient services. Most of these offer a combination of fun activities mixed with group therapy, parenting classes and medical checkups. Experts say these types of programs, where kids and parents make a commitment to losing weight together, tend to have lasting results. The idea is to change the whole home environment, rather than putting the kids on a diet. “If the changes made are familywide, they have a very good chance of sticking,” says Dr. Bill Dietz, a pediatrician and director of the Centers for Disease Control’s Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity. In Marquard’s case, she and her kids cut back on restaurant meals and started carefully monitoring fat and calories in prepared foods. They now cook mostly fish and vegetables at home.

Karin Mallooly says the expense of taking her two girls, ages 9 and 11, to the family program at Wellspring in Pinehurst, N.C. (wellspringfamilycamp.com), was worth it. “It was to the point where my 11-year-old daughter was going to have to wear plus-size clothing and I thought, no way is that going to happen,” says Mallooly, a stay-at-home mom from Rockville Centre, N.Y. Not only did Mallooly’s two girls drop the weight, but she did, too. “It’s been two years and I’ve kept off 30 pounds,” she says. The program, (\$3,950 per week, per person) includes nutritional counseling and behavior-modification sessions that help campers learn to recognize when they’re eating because they’re sad or angry, and encourage them to go for a walk or run instead. But the program also includes the best parts of summer camp: canoeing, water skiing, hiking, mountain biking, tennis and arts and crafts. Now at home, the family eats meals together, and they snack on healthy soups, plenty of raw vegetables and only an occasional sweet treat.

A growing number of outpatient programs offer similar services for less money. Duke University’s Healthy Lifestyles Program gives patients medical evaluations, psychological counseling and monthly checkups. (Prices vary according to one’s health insurance.) Weight Watchers is also reaching out to kids with a pilot program, called Weight Watchers Family, slowly opening around the country. Prices and program structure vary, but at the Tampa, Fla., location (pedialliance.com; click on “Our Services”), families pay \$100 for 10 weekly hourlong sessions with a coach trained in pediatric and adolescent weight issues. Parents learn how to shop for healthy food, increase their family’s activity level and become better role models for their children (call 800-651-6000 for more information).

While the quickest route to weight loss may be through an immersion program, there are things you can do at home to start the process. Sarah Armstrong, director of Duke’s Healthy Lifestyles Program, suggests letting kids drink only healthy beverages: low-fat milk or water—no supersize Cokes. Breakfast should be served daily, as it jump-starts the metabolism for the day. Dietz recommends no more than one hour of television per day to relax. If kids want more, they should hop on a treadmill or do sit-ups while watching. A good night’s sleep is important: for every hour of sleep a child loses, he is 6 percent more likely to be obese by his teen years.

Mallooly’s daughters have a good chance of staying slim. After her 9-year-old realized that a treat she’d bought from an ice-cream truck contained 22 grams of fat, “she was shocked and felt bad for eating it,” says Mallooly. “We’ve come a long way.”