

## Camp -- with salads

**Forget old-fashioned deprivation. Today's weight-loss programs offer motivation, nutrition, cooking classes -- even some snacks. And they don't use the word 'diet.'**

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THIS time, the fourth time, 14-year-old Brennyn Bradley plans to banish 15, 20 pounds — forever.

"Everyone in my school is stick thin and then there's me and a couple of other people," says the tall, blond teen. "There are some people who just, like, have to rub it and say, 'You're fat.' "

Corey Johnson, 10, hopes a summer of sports and healthful food will accomplish what karate, walking, swimming and a personal trainer have failed to do — help her drop numerous pounds.

Nothing about 14-year-old Jason Kautz says fat, but his nutrition-conscious mom and athletic dad think his eating and exercise habits could sure use an overhaul.

For most kids, summer is for running through sprinklers, learning to swim, sleeping late and watching TV. Brennyn, Corey, and Jason have passed this summer differently: trying to shed weight, learning about fats and carbs and portion sizes and talking about the temptation of food and the jibes of peers.

All three have come to the New Image weight-loss camp in Ojai, which aims to slim kids down and send them home better equipped to stay that way.

Each summer, about 75 boys and girls travel here for anywhere from one to seven weeks; most are older teen girls. A few are morbidly obese, but the majority seem to have 20 to 40 extra pounds lodged in overly rounded bellies, while others appear barely overweight, if at all.

Some kids come because their parents want them to curb lazy habits and a fondness for junk food. Some are sent by parents with not-so-fond memories of their own weight battles as children who want their offspring to avoid the same fate.

In a few cases, the kids themselves are motivated to shave off some weight before things

get out of hand.

"Fat camps" circa 2006 are no longer the calorie-deprivation, up-at-dawn boot camps they were some 40 years ago when they first appeared on the summer landscape — with tedious calisthenics and yummy kid favorites such as liver. But now, as then, weight-loss camps hold a small but tenacious place among the nation's summer offerings.

They are costly — about \$3,000 for two weeks to \$7,000 for seven weeks. But letting someone else have a crack at their offspring's weight problem appeals to many parents, and in these days of endless talk about the widening of America's children, camps are but the extreme end of a growing continuum of offerings, including private, after-school nutrition and exercise programs and kid-only gyms.

It helps that the camps have undergone an evolution, making them less extreme and more acceptable to parents and children alike. At New Image, aerobics, sports, nutrition lessons, cooking classes and group therapy-ish "rap" sessions are tempered with conventional camp fare such as arts, crafts, swimming, dance and drama.

Incoming packages are still checked for contraband candy and snacks, but the word "diet" is banned, and within a framework of copious exercise and healthful meals, even a tiny bit of junk food is allowed, such as 150-calorie bags of Cracker Jack.

But while kids do lose weight — obligatory early morning soccer and lots of salad will do that — many experts doubt if these camps are truly effective. Though some believe the camps provide a jump-start, they also note that most kids who slim down over the summer invariably gain everything back.

"I think it's short-sighted to send a child off to weight-loss camp thinking it's going to be a long-term solution," says Dr. Thomas Wadden, director of the Center for Weight and Eating Disorders program at the University of Pennsylvania. If parents would keep up the program at home, he says, kids might have a chance to maintain or continue their weight loss. But few parents, he adds, succeed in doing a 180 with family meals and exercise.

David Ettenberg, owner of Camp Shane in New York, says success stories at his camp abound — and that even after nine months, many have kept the weight off or lost even more. Often, the successes return anyway, he adds, "because they love it here, they feel comfortable here."

The Ojai camp, situated at a spacious, 1920s-era preparatory high school in this small town near Santa Barbara, is one of an estimated dozen or so such camps in the nation. It has all the bells and whistles: a spacious gymnasium, weight room, sizable pool, copious tennis courts and verdant playing fields ringed by eucalyptus trees.

Camp owner Tony Sparber — he owns two other similar camps in Pennsylvania and Florida — says that when he started the camps 14 years ago he used to see more morbidly obese kids enrolling. These days, many are only mildly overweight. Mindful of

the fact that baby fat may morph into heart disease and diabetes, some parents are taking decisive action sooner.

Highly structured days here leave little time to even think about food. After breakfast — on a recent morning it was toaster waffles, yogurt, fruit and milk — comes a one-hour aerobics class that everyone attends. Once the thumpy dance music starts, some campers punch the air and high-kick like chorus girls. Others talk to friends while their arms and legs flop aimlessly, eyes gazing at the clock.

Next up: team sports — soccer, softball, volleyball, basketball, kickball. By 11 a.m. it's warm and muggy, and there are copious sweat stains on shorts and T-shirts, many of them unabashedly form-fitting, some bearing logos of fast food restaurants such as Arby's or products such as Coke. Out on a field where the boys are playing kickball, counselor Drew Carter yells, "Great kick!" when 11-year-old Thomas Silenski sends a ball flying into the outfield, and then, "C'mon, hustle! *Run* onto the field," to two boys casually strolling from the dugout.

The hope is that camp will spark some athletic pursuit, making exercise part of a daily routine even for kids who are painfully familiar with being picked last for teams at school. Whether that happens is another thing. A group of preteen girls walking to the softball field, asked if they had fun in aerobics, mince no words.

"*Fun?*" exclaims one. "No," she says emphatically. "Fun is playing video games or watching TV or going to the mall."

The rest of the day unfolds at a fast clip — a healthful lunch then a menu of swimming, drama, dance, tennis, cooking and arts and crafts. Then there is "rap," hour-long sessions that are part gut-spilling, part advice column. Even after being together for just a few days the children speak frankly about sneaking food, binge eating, being teased by peers and berated by parents, as well as their hopes and their fears.

"I want to go back and not be lazy," says one teenage girl. "I want to be the one to say to my friends, 'Let's work out.'"

"I'm afraid of not losing the amount of weight my mother wants me to lose," says another.

Cindy Moore, the camp's staff registered dietitian, offers an ear, encouragement and advice — such as using smaller plates to downsize portions or simply staying out of the kitchen. The emphasis, even for the younger kids, is on taking responsibility.

"Try to eat meals with your families more often," Moore advises. "Talk to your parents about it."

"What if you don't have a family?" one girl asks. "My mom is working all the time and I'm by myself a lot."

## **The veteran**

Brennyn Bradley first came to "Camp Ojai" when she was 11. Back for a fourth time, she's a veteran, joking with camp counselors and acting as unofficial guide for first-timers.

A tall girl sporting braces, long hair and a muscular build that some extra pounds can't hide, Brennyn says she returns for two reasons: She truly loves the camp and the friends she's made. And, between each summer session, she usually gains back the weight she loses.

"I lose about 15 to 20 pounds, depending on how hard I work," she says, sitting outside at a picnic bench during a break. Her downfall, she says, comes around the holidays or when faced with the dubious fare at the school snack bar: "There's candy and greasy foods and stuff like that," she says. "Sometimes the temptations are so bad."

Then there are her two thin brothers at home in Cave Creek, Ariz. "It's hard to watch them eat fries and hamburgers and stuff," she says. "They shove it down, and get two more, and I'm there with my chicken sandwich."

Brennyn's mother Danae, 38, says she began to worry about her daughter's weight when some 15 unwanted pounds showed up. A history of family obesity sparked concern that it wasn't temporary (Danae, her husband and mother have all had gastric-bypass surgery.) "I wanted to bring her attention to it," says Danae. "But she didn't want to learn it from me."

The first year at camp, Brennyn lost about 15 pounds. "She was so muscular and toned. This was not the same child," Danae says. Upon her return, "we got all gung-ho at first," she adds. "My older son went running with her, and she would make healthy lunches."

But the family's eating habits didn't stay virtuous and Brennyn, says Danae, felt deprived. When Brennyn's grandfather passed away last year, the family put weight loss on the back burner. "I saw ourselves slacking," she says, "and I can see the repercussions in Brennyn."

This time, Danae says, "I hope that something clicks." Brennyn plans to attend morning workout classes at school. Danae says the family will again adopt healthier habits. "This is going to be a lifestyle change with everyone," she says. "Not just Brennyn."

## **The first-timer**

Corey Johnson is a Camp Ojai first-timer and one of the youngest campers. She also has more weight to lose than most.

Sitting in her dorm room, a poster of thin, blond teen queen actress Ashley Tisdale above

her bed, she explains that this is her first long span away from her parents in Hawaii. She's an only child, and has been calling home about three or four times a day from the dorm pay phone.

"My parents said, 'Do you want to go to a camp?' And I said sure," Corey quietly recalls, hands folded neatly in her lap. "I thought it would be cool."

She says her parents have done an awful lot to help her lose weight: hired a personal trainer, enrolled her in karate class, gone walking with her, taken her to the pool. "It's a lot harder when you're with friends and stuff who don't have the same problems as you." And, she says, "Some of the boys in my class are really mean. I just walk away." Corey's parents made the decision to send their daughter to camp when some worrisome behaviors showed up. "She got in a rut of not wanting to exercise, and she was sneaking food," says her mother, Mary, who recently lost 45 pounds and is herself a veteran of weight-loss camp. She credits camp with teaching her about nutrition and exercise. "I should have been able to teach Corey, but with my working and everything I have to do, I let it go," she says.

Her daughter, she adds, doesn't mind her weight. "She loves who she is. But I am concerned about diabetes, and I decided to give it a try."

She says she'd like to see Corey lose 40 to 50 pounds during her five weeks of camp — an average loss of eight to 10 pounds a week. That is far above the one-to-two-pounds-a-week recommendation of pediatric weight-loss experts. Still, she won't be disappointed if Corey doesn't reach that mark, she says, and plans a family regime of healthy meals and regular exercise for her daughter's return.

"We have the whole school year to work on it."

### **The skeptic**

Jason Kautz, at 5-foot-1 and 110 pounds, stands out immediately among the campers because of his slim build. His body is practically lost in oversized shorts and T-shirts. The soon-to-be-high-schooler from Santa Barbara says he wants to get in shape for an Outward Bound trip in a few weeks time, but the primary drive to be here came from his parents: They wanted him to learn good nutrition habits and drop a few pounds.

His friends, he says, laughed when he said he was going to Camp Ojai. "They thought it was funny I was being forced to go to weight-loss camp," he says. When queried by fellow campers, he tells them that his parents made him go, or that he's there to work on his self-esteem.

Jason yanks up his shirt to reveal a stomach he says could stand some downsizing. He tugs at what he says are rolls of fat; they look more like skin. "I don't think I'm in danger of being obese or something, but I feel like I could lose maybe 10 pounds. Five pounds," he says.

Jason's mother Sylvia agrees her son is not super-overweight, and that maybe five pounds should do it. She and her husband Joe, who both stay in shape, chose the camp to teach their son better eating and exercise habits. Jason had been to traditional summer camps, but those didn't stress nutrition and fitness enough, they felt.

"I wish that at a younger age I had learned the true emotional and physical benefits of good nutrition and exercise," says Sylvia, who is 5-foot-3 and 115 pounds. Food at home is healthy and nutritious, but Jason veers off that path when with friends: "He's hitting the sodas, and he really craves carbs. There's only so much bugging you can do."

Adds Joe, "His mother and I have been trying to instill in him the fact that he needs to obtain this lifestyle, and we were trying to think of what we could do that would be fun ... we never described it as 'fat camp.' We said it was a 'healthy lifestyle camp.' "

Joe and Jason go to the gym together and occasionally face off in the tennis court. But Jason still stands out in his family. "His brother has virtually no body fat," says Joe. "Jason doesn't exercise as much, and his brother eats better. We tell him all the time, but he doesn't want to accept it. He says, 'Justin eats the same things I do,' and I say 'No, he doesn't. And he's been on the tennis courts for two and a half hours, so don't compare yourself.' "

Will life at home change when Jason returns? "That's an interesting question," Joe says. "I haven't really given it much thought, and I probably should have. We're certainly going to encourage him and hopefully praise him when he shows better eating habits, and encourage him to get out and do more."

Jason isn't sure yet how much he is learning at camp. "My parents are into health food, so I already know a lot of this," he says.

"I learned how to make a lanyard," he adds.

Research on the effectiveness of weight-loss camps is sparse, and what studies exist are of short duration. One English study found that children attending a weight-loss camp for about a month lost about 13 pounds, decreased their body mass index by an average of 2.4 units and showed improvements in blood pressure and aerobic fitness compared with kids who didn't attend camp.

But the study didn't include any follow-ups with the campers. In years to come, a clearer picture may emerge: A relatively new chain of camps — Wellspring Adventure camps — is beginning to track campers' progress. New Image camp owner Sparber says his graduates often share their weight-loss successes, and that former campers are called during the year to see if they've kept the weight off. About half say they do. "But it's very difficult to know whether they're telling the truth or not," he says. "My gut tells me that for a few months it's very good, but people start to slip during the holidays."

He guesses only 10% to 15% truly keep the weight off.

Despite poor results, Wadden says he understands why parents send their children to weight-loss camps. "They keep offering hope," he says. "Some parents feel exasperated. They've done everything, and their child is still gaining weight."

The truth, say pediatricians and obesity experts, is that childhood weight loss is complex and difficult to achieve. A key component is creating a home where exercise is a regular family pursuit and fatty and sugary junk foods such as chips and cookies are verboten, and healthful fare such as fresh fruits and vegetables are encouraged.

That's hardly the norm in America today. A study released two years ago found that on a typical day, almost one-third of children and teens age four to 19 eat fast food. The National Restaurant Assn. reported in 2004 that the average U.S. household spends about \$2,434 a year on eating out at restaurants, where portions are generally huge and calorie-laden.

Americans aren't big on fitness, either: According to a 2002 survey by the National Center for Health Statistics, almost 40% do no exercise during leisure time.

Kids must learn healthful choices, obesity experts stress. But they acknowledge that kids aren't usually the ones grocery shopping or choosing a restaurant. Parents and siblings often don't want to give up their favorite potato chips and ice cream, so kids returning from camp often find that things at home are just as they were before, with all the same traps that helped them pack on pounds in the first place.

Sparber says when parents sign their kids up for camp they're counseled on the importance of changing the home, and that kids are sent home with a handbook filled with meal plans, recipes, nutrition information and exercise tips. Parents are encouraged to call with questions, and kids can e-mail a fitness trainer and nutritionist.

The six-month follow-up program includes monthly check-in calls to parents.

The calls often go unreturned.

"We feel we send them home prepared, and we do the best to follow up," Sparber says. "Some people are too busy or can't make the effort to make things happen."

If camps like this usually fail in their mission to help children maintain weight loss, they succeed in one important area: providing a haven for youths who are teased, ridiculed and shamed by friends and family for the way that they look. Friendships forged at camp last year-long, sustained via e-mail and phone calls, providing a substantial support system.

And here at camp, hefty kids can — and do — flaunt their bodies, secure enough that they don't face repercussions from showing skin. At a softball game, a teen girl beats the heat by hiking up her shirt, revealing copious belly flesh. At the pool, another girl sports

a skimpy bright yellow bikini top as she strolls with a younger camper, telling her, "I started gaining weight in high school.... "

After dinner, girls trade their sweats for more stylish clothes — tight jeans, short skirts and body-hugging tops — and boys wear form-fitting, hip shirts and pants.

"People are really mean to obese kids," says Dr. Reginald Washington, medical director of Rocky Mountain Pediatric Cardiology in Lone Tree, Colo. "One of the good things about camp is that most of the kids really do have a good time. They're with other kids who are just like them, and they're not ostracized. It helps their self-esteem and other issues — until you remove them from camp. And then, it's business as usual."