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ON THE WEB

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## For Overweight Children, Are 'Fat Camps' a Solution?

By ABBY ELLIN

Two summers ago, Alexis Werth Mason was 12 years old and weighed 133 pounds. Not huge, but at 4-foot-11, she was heavier than she wanted to be.

Shopping was painful. Classmates teased her. A neighbor told her that she was too big to pull on his sled. After desperately trying - and failing - at diets, her mother, Bonnie Werth, asked if she wanted to go to a weight-loss camp.

"She said, 'I can't go to a fat camp, Mommy, all the kids will make fun of me,' " Ms. Werth, the president of Team Services, a marketing firm in Woodbury, N.Y., recalled. "But I convinced her to go."

"It wasn't so much the weight loss," Ms. Werth said, "but I wanted her to be around other kids with the same problems. She felt very isolated and alone in her issues."

Alexis, who is known as Lexi, spent eight weeks at Camp Shane, in Ferndale, N.Y., and lost 25 pounds. She has kept off every ounce since.

This is a big deal.

It is easy, after all, to lose weight in a controlled environment, but it is a different story when you are back home and faced with temptations like pizza and ice cream and get little to no exercise. So it's not surprising that many children who attend weight-loss camps regain the weight.

"Coming home from camp was hard," Lexi, now 14, said. "I knew what I had to do, but I saw everyone eating at school. When you see all your friends pigging out and watching old movies and crying and stuff, you want to join in. It's peer pressure. So I ate in moderation."

Thousands of young people will be spending this summer at weight-loss camps, a popular option for parents who have no idea how to inspire their children to shed pounds. It is a slowly growing industry. Nationwide, there are about a dozen camps devoted strictly to weight loss, four of them opened in the last year. But whether they work remains unclear.

Statistics about weight-loss camps are hard to come by. Campers often do not keep in touch with camp directors, nor do they always respond honestly to questionnaires.

But of the 1,000 campers who will weave their way this summer in and out of Tony Sparber's three New Image camps in Florida, California and the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania, more than half are repeat customers. The figure is about the same for the 800 campers heading to Camp Shane in the Catskills.

"Maybe they're not losing the weight specifically, but instead they're learning something that they can use 20 years down the road and put into use when they're ready," said Marla Coleman, a former president of the American Camping Association.

Ms. Coleman added: "It's education. Knowledge. It goes to everything camp does, which is experiential learning."

Perhaps more important, Ms. Coleman said, camp gives children a reprieve from weight gain and the torment they often experience back in the real world. Many play sports for the first time, and have social lives.

But that is not always the case. Danielle Rothman, now 17, spent three summers at Camp Shane. "Everyone at Shane was overweight, yet people were still being made fun of about their weight," said Ms. Rothman, who lives in Dix Hills, N.Y.. "The more overweight kids are still made fun of. I was one of the thinner kids, and people would say, 'Why are you here?' It made me feel good, but after a while I wanted to hit them."

Weight-loss camps usually run for three weeks, six weeks or eight week sessions, and they cost about \$7,500 for the entire summer - about \$1,500 more than nonspecialized camps. Campers get about 1,500 calories a day, and campers generally spend three to four hours a day doing some kind of physical activity, as well other activities like drama or arts and crafts. There are weekly weigh-ins and regular classes in nutrition and cooking.

Most camps offer sessions for campers to explore their feelings about food and weight. But critics worry that the camps are not run by people who have the necessary credentials to handle children with serious emotional baggage, and that the sessions are too short to change a lifetime of bad habits.

Teresa Guerrero worked at a camp in Southern California in 2003 and 2004, where she was a guidance counselor.

"There were a lot of very messed-up kids," said Ms. Guerrero, 26, who is a doctoral candidate in clinical and school psychology at Hofstra. "The majority of them were compulsive overeaters."

"A lot were medicated, or ate out of boredom, or cut themselves," she said. "A lot had experienced divorce or the death of a parent. They could trace the weight gain back to that. It was a big responsibility for the counselors, none of whom was really equipped to deal with it."

**One of the more promising programs is offered by the two-year-old Wellspring Camps, which operates Camp Wellspring, near Lake Placid, N.Y., for young women ages 14 to 22; Wellspring Adventure Camp near Asheville, N.C., for boys and girls 11 to 16; and Western Wellspring Adventure Camp in California, for boys and girls 13 to 18.**

**Unlike traditional weight-loss camps, Wellspring uses a cognitive behavioral approach. Campers set goals and monitor themselves, techniques that are components of behavior modification, one of the most widely accepted approaches to long-term weight-loss success.**

**Each camper is responsible for her own eating and exercise habits. At meals, for example, campers get "controlled" foods, like measured entrees and dessert, and "uncontrolled" foods: berries, melons or fat-free soups. They can eat as much of the uncontrolled foods as they want, but they have to jot down the calories and fat grams in a journal, with the goal of staying under 20 grams of fat and about 1,200 calories a day.**

**They use pedometers and are told to aim for a minimum of 10,000 steps a day. The overall goal is to change eating habits and make new ones.**

**"Self-control is a process in behavioral terms - keeping track of target behaviors and systematically evaluating these behaviors and goal setting," said Dr. Daniel Kirschenbaum, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern who helped design the program, but has no financial involvement in the camps.**

**Dr. Kirschenbaum said self-control could be taught like any other skill through instruction, modeling and encouragement.**

**So far, the camps have had encouraging success. A recent study by Wellspring found that 91 percent of all its campers had maintained the weight or continued to lose six months after camp ended; the weight loss afterward averaged 7.4 pounds. The camps plan to continue tracking campers' long-term weight loss to try to persuade health insurers to cover the programs.**

Still, those involved agree that the most significant factor for success is the level of parental involvement once camp ends. It is not enough for the child to return home from 30 pounds lighter if the household does not change as well - whether that means eliminating junk foods or encouraging exercise.

"The people who are successful are the parents who go the extra mile and are observant and watch their kids," said Tony Sparber, 48, who has been in the industry for 25 years.

Although all camps offer lectures for parents on visiting day, only a few show up, organizers say.

After camp ends, a New Image nutritionist calls families each month. Every two months they receive a newsletter with recipes. But Mr. Sparber acknowledges that most people do not follow through. "It starts out strong, and as time goes on it fades," he said. This year, in an effort to reach more people, he is adding an online counseling program with a nutritionist, as well as a weight management and fitness program at the Jewish Community Center in Tenafly, N.J.

**Only about one-third of the campers at Camp Wellspring and Wellspring Adventure Camp adhered to its after-care program, which includes keeping a daily online journal for self-monitoring and setting goals, and chatting with a behavioral coach by phone or e-mail.**

**All of those who followed that regimen, sustained or continued their weight loss at the three-month mark, said Ryan Craig, president of Wellspring camps, who is also director of the Academy of the Sierras, a boarding school for obese adolescents in Reedley, Calif.**

Lexi Werth Mason attributes her weight-loss success to two things: her goal of fitting into a two-piece bathing suit, and her mother. When she first returned home from camp, her mother had snack bags full of pre-cut vegetables waiting for her. Every night they discuss what Lexi can eat. The two shop together, read labels, prepare menus and cook.

"People don't have time to sit down to home-cooked meals, and they're so busy they get Big Macs," said Lexi. "At camp I learned that there's 590 calories in one, so we don't do that anymore. Now we cook dinners because I'm conscious of what I'm eating. We substitute light or fat-free for sour cream. Even if you do have a cookie every once in a while, it's not that big of a deal. You work it off."

Lexi's mother said, "My fear was that when she lost all this weight that she would get so obsessive about it that it would develop into an eating disorder."

Ms. Werth continued: "From the day she came home, I said, 'It's not about leaving all this stuff behind.' The minute you deprive yourself of everything you've loved and enjoyed, you will end up compulsively overeating. I was trying to create a balance for her and proving to her that you could have your cookies every day but in moderation."

She added, "I signed her right up for Curves, and she got on her bicycle and rode to the gym and watched everything she's eating."

Ms. Werth also locks up junk food in a kitchen cabinet, and only she has the key. Lexi said she found that helpful.

Most important for Lexi, nothing tastes as great as thin feels. And that kind of motivation is something that no diet or weight-loss camp can instill in a person.

"Last winter my friend couldn't pull me on the sled because I was too heavy, and I was really upset about it," Lexi said. "This year, I went to his house and he pulled me, and that was one of the happiest days of my life."