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New program helps youth learn how to battle obesity

Goal is to teach children healthy habits for life

By **KIMBERLY STAUFFER**

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For the nine children enrolled in a new afterschool weight loss program, it's an upward battle for long-term success and, most of all, control.

Known for their nationwide boarding schools and summer camps, the Wellspring program has launched a three-month after-school weight loss program in The Woodlands to give children the opportunity to learn healthy living habits close to home.

It's easy to assume the program is about fitting in, said Jennifer Aune, the group's behavioral therapist. "We talk a lot about why we're doing this. We're doing it for health. Fitting into clothes, being more sociable are benefits of being healthy."

Each has a different story for how they came to be seated in a stuffy room snacking on fudge-free brownies and reviewing self-monitoring journals to record every calorie, fat gram and step they take.

Ariana Malek, 13, was the skeptic chubby from birth; 13-year-old Jessalin Salinas was always the thin girl until last summer; Jeremy Giblin, 13, gained dozens of pounds overeating in front of the computer screen.

Wellspring, a national program known for dozens of summer camps and boarding schools, teaches children not how to diet, but the healthy habits needed to take control of their weight and change themselves for the better. The core idea incorporates daily exercise with the knowledge necessary to make good eating decisions.

"They're struggling. They're adjusting," Aune said. "They think, oh, I can never eat pizza again, but, no, just make better choices. Find ways to modify. If they feel there are foods they can't eat, they're never going to make it work."

Each day is a commitment to the program. It's the choice between salad and pizza, water and flavored drinks. A pedometer tracks them on their daily goal of 10,000 steps



Camarin Guillory scores during the after school weight loss program at Bear Branch Recreation Center. Students learn nutrition, exercises, and positive reinforcement.



Program director Katherine Howard watches her class during an exercise period during the after school weight loss program at Bear Branch Recreation Center.

and twice weekly meetings force them to be accountable for their mistakes and achievements.

"You're still trying, but it's difficult," said Jordon Hancock, 14. "Every day it's two steps forward, one step back."

Healthy choices

The grocery store can be a dangerous place. A visit to pick up bread and lunch meat can become a shopping binge in the snack aisle without preparation.

Katherine Howard, Wellspring program director for The Woodlands, recently led the group on a two-mile roundtrip walk to a local Krogers to buy a healthy lunch on a budget. Instead of soda and greasy chips, they bought flavored water and pretzels.

"You know how hard it is to have to work to burn this weight. Help yourself out by making healthy choices," Howard said. "Fat free. Does that mean boring? Does that mean tasteless? No. Love more foods that love us back."

Part of the program's success comes from the cognitive behavior therapy sessions. Aune examines how the children's emotions and experiences affect their eating.

"We talk about how they're feeling. It addresses faulty thoughts and beliefs and how they affect our behavior," she said. "It helps them to process their feelings. They're all going through the program together, so they have the same issues, and they chime in and motivate each other with suggestions and encouragement because weight loss is difficult."

Weight management

The euphoria of shedding pounds the first few weeks, the frustration and anger when they creep back or refuse to budge, the difficult acceptance of dealing with weight management day in and day out are all part of the journey, Aune said.

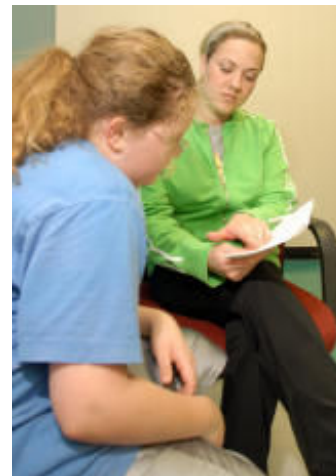
Many in the group consider themselves in the frustration stage. Jeremy said he knows the long summer months were his downfall. "I got hooked on the computer. I'm going to be doing a lot better, but that was just bad. I was eating hundreds and hundreds of fat grams a day."

But acknowledging it does not make it any easier.

Ariana said she remembers gorging on food in front of the



Ariana Malek and her classmates exercise to an exercise video during the after school weight loss program.



McKenna Christler and Behavioral Coach Jennifer Aune talk about Christler's journal during the after school weight loss program.



McKenna Christler and Behavioral Coach Jennifer Aune talk about Christler's journal during the after school weight loss program.

television as a little girl.

"I always had a little belly and skinny arms and skinny legs," she said. "I'd think, who was that eating? That's not me. I'm the little kid who runs outside and plays. Afterward I always think, who was that?"

Aune said frustration is a sign of progress.

"Thinking about what you eat and making changes is a huge part of this program," she said.

Jessalin had always been naturally thin, something her friend Jordon envied. She was 11 years old when she started noticing the weight gain.

"I lost a lot of weight at the beginning and now I'm gaining it all back," she said.

Ariana said she considers being overweight a disease, and even though she understands it's all right to be discouraged, it does not make living with rules any easier.

"You didn't choose to be born and certainly didn't choose to be fat," she said.

Howard emphasizes with the daily hardship of weight management. Overweight as a teenager, she has since lost 75 pounds.

"Losing weight and being biologically destined for it be harder, it's not like having bad genes is the same as having only one leg," she said. "You've got the tools now to make these changes. This is the beginning of a completely new journey. You should be excited."

Boosting morale

Only a month into the program, the children have made huge adjustments in what and how they eat, measuring portion size and considering healthy alternatives. Aune said the group support helps boost morale.

"There are nine kids who have, for the most part, never met each other. As much as they may resent having to do this, that's your group," she said. "At the end of the day, when they leave here they have their own network."

Howard said the program is meant to give back the one thing the children feel they have lost.

"It's within their control," she said. "That's the big shining light."



McKenna Christler misses the goal as Jeremy Giblin gives chase during the after school weight loss program.



Jessalin Salinas runs with the ball during the after school weight loss program.