

## **Growing up overweight: For plus-size kids and their parents it's a minefield of prejudice and pressure**

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CAMPBELL'S BAY, Que. - Meagan Wood doesn't say "back off!" and use her fists anymore the way she did in sixth grade when a boy at school called her mean names.

"I've calmed down a bit," says Meagan, 14. "I don't do that anymore. It's just rude. It's uncivilized."

Meagan is crowded around a picnic table with half a dozen other campers at Active Challenge, a weight-loss camp exclusively for girls at a private lakeside retreat near Ottawa.

The four-week camp teaches outdoor adventure and "appropriate portion control" to girls aged 13 to 18 who are at least nine kilograms too heavy and whose health is at risk because of their bodies.

Meagan arrived at camp this summer weighing 108 kg.

"My doctor is forcing me to get to at least 180 pounds, otherwise I may have heart problems when I'm older, and back problems."

The girls have come from as far as the Ozark hills in Arkansas and Comox, B.C., to a camp where no boys are allowed and no one rushes for a towel to cover-up after laps in the lake.

During lunch, they giggle and call each other BFF "best friend forever" but when conversation shifts to what it means growing up fat, they become more serious. The largest of them hangs back, as if trying to be invisible.

They say it means sitting in the girls' bathroom at school scratching out the mean message someone wrote about you on the stall.

It means having skinny girls at the pool stare at you "like you're an alien from

another planet," and being too embarrassed to say you bought your new T-shirt at Pennington's or the plus-sized department at Wal-Mart.

Cringing when your thin friends say: "I'm so fat!" when they're half your size.

Trying to be "good" by not eating and then losing your resolve and eating everything in the fridge.

Some have high blood pressure or weak joints. Some are being tested monthly for Type 2 diabetes because their bodies are rejecting the way they process sugar. One 13-year-old, five-foot four-inch camper arrived weighing 275 pounds. "Almost every single girl contacted me before her parents did," says director **Jill Baxter**, who was overweight as a teenager. "They found us. They were out looking. They made a deal with their parents: "You do this for me, and I'll do this for you."

Meagan's mother Josee, turned to the camp out of desperation. "Her eating was out of control, and I didn't know what to do.

"In our family, we're not terrible eaters, we're very normal eaters." But the family used to eat a lot of beef "and one of the things we never paid attention to was the size of her portions. In front of you, she wouldn't eat enormously it was what she was sneaking into her room at night.

"My mother and I got together and said, "we've got to do something." We were worried about her heart. We were worried about her self-esteem."

There's a lot of prejudice, says Josee, who is a vegetarian and schoolteacher.

"Even grown ups would look at me as a mom and say: "What are you doing to your kid?"

Canadian children are getting fatter, with obesity rates tripling in recent decades. Human biology and genetics. Soft drinks and X-boxes. The lack of physical education in schools. All have been targeted in the obesity epidemic.

What no one wants to talk about is families, says Dr. Doug Davey, chief of surgery at the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton.

"If you've got an eight-year-old that weighs 110, or 120 pounds, there is something wrong. And it isn't the kid. Kids aren't self-sufficient. They're not out foraging food everyday."

Some critics say fears about treading on parental autonomy has stopped us from seeing the parents' role in moral terms.

"That's a heavy thing to lay on them," argues Sharron Dalton, an associate

professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University.

There's no question family behaviours can contribute to childhood obesity, says Dalton, author of *Our Overweight Children: What Parents, Schools and Communities Can Do To Control The Fatness Epidemic*.

She has seen sports drinks "that blue stuff that looks like window cleaner" in the bottles of four-month-olds, "which of course trains their taste buds to expect sweet when they get fluids." In her book she describes how one overweight parent at a parent-teacher meeting insisted her children ate as well as she did and that they didn't need advice on nutrition. "When I was sick, my daughter set out the dips to go with the chicken nuggets she knew what to do," the mother said.

But family life today is a "minefield", Dalton says.

Many parents feel as if they're swimming upstream. Poverty plays a role, but even when it doesn't, harried parents juggling work and children's activities, are often "unavailable, too tired or simply lacking in interest and know-how" to fix a healthy meal. When a child gets fat, "It's a problem first of recognition, and then it's a problem of parents feeling their parenting is being judged, and not just about food, but all aspects of it," Dalton said in an interview.

Many parents are reluctant to admit their child has a weight problem, especially when everybody around them is getting more fleshy and doughy. "They use other children as their frame of reference," explains Dr. Tom Warshawski, chief of pediatrics at Kelowna General Hospital and chair of the B.C.-based Childhood Obesity Foundation.

Randomly survey 1,000 parents and none will say they have an obese child, "even though, by chance, there should be between eight and 12 per cent who do, and the same number of parents who have an overweight kid," says Dr. Mark Tremblay, head of Active Healthy Kids Canada.

Genetics accounts for some of the problem. One sibling can be thin, the other very overweight, even though it's the same home, the same parents, the same supper table. "One has the genetic make-up that really predisposes them to gain weight. It's unfair, but you've got to deal with it," Warshawski says.

Meagan Wood weighed 2.8 kg at birth. But from age six onwards, she was always taller and larger than her friends.

"My sisters all struggled with bad weight issues," her mother says.

Some parents think their children will outgrow it, that it's better to be a "big

eater" than a skimpy one and that it doesn't matter if their child is fat as long as he is happy.

The data shows how flawed that thinking is: Overweight children are at risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, abnormal blood clotting, hardening of the arteries, sleep apnea, asthma and "nonalcoholic" fatty liver disease.

Dalton says children as young as two will eat if forced to "which they are, you know: 'Here's the airplane coming into the hangar.' We encourage children to finish everything on their plate and reward them with dessert."

That teaches children not to recognize brain signals that tell them they're full.

And if a child is overweight?

The answer, says Dr. Geoff Ball, isn't about "fixing" the child, though some families see it that way. "It really is something the entire family has to deal with," says Ball, assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Alberta and director of the new pediatric centre for weight and health at Edmonton's Stollery Children's Hospital.

Studies show kids who eat at least half of their meals at home are less likely to be overweight, because they tend to eat more fruits and vegetables and fewer fried foods. But more and more family meals are delivered through the car window.

Warshawski says many parents also don't appreciate just how many empty calories their kids are consuming. It takes just an extra 100 calories per day to gain one pound of weight per month.

A 591 ml container of soft drink or orange juice contain 260 calories. "The average 13-year-old boy is going to have to jog for 50 five zero minutes to burn off one of those containers," Warshawski says.

For four weeks at Active Challenge, Meagan and the other girls eat vegetables and dip, veggie wraps, fish, chicken and more produce, says camp director **Jill Baxter**, "than a lot of the girls have consumed in a long time."

They learn appropriate portion sizes: a hockey puck for pasta, the palm of your hand for meat. They begin every day with a two-kilometre hike. Girls who began camp thinking "wilderness" is the parking lot at a mall survive a three-day hiking trip, a six-day canoe trip, aerobics and swimming every day. They learn carbs are brain food.

After four weeks, they lose 110 pounds among them, about the equivalent of an entire person. They learn: You are not the fat girl. That's not who you are, says Baxter. ``You are an amazing woman. You just happen to be carrying a few extra pounds."

Today, Meagan Wood is exercising regularly. She's riding her horses. She's taken over some of the family cooking, ``which has been really helpful," her mother says. She doesn't drink two per cent milk anymore, and puts diet hot chocolate on the grocery list. She's started dressing like a girl, her mother says. ``Overweight girls will dress like guys, baggy shirts, guy jeans which tend not to have a cut in the waist."

Meagan's weight is down to 84 kg.

``The camp was amazing for her," her mother says. ``I hope we can afford it next year. We had to really scrape for it."

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ON THE WEB: For more on obesity and to have your say on this series, visit [www.canada.com/bodyandhealth](http://www.canada.com/bodyandhealth)

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\_ In their own words: Comments from the young women at Active Challenge.

- Daniella Postavsky:

"I think they should shut down all fast food restaurants. I think they should teach more nutrition classes in school, because most of what we're getting is from our parents or commercials, and we're getting twisted views of what they think is right. Our parents don't know much more than we do because they're teaching us things that aren't usually correct."

"The pressure to be slim is everywhere. The movies stars, the magazines, it's everywhere around you. Like, even your friends. They're like: `I'm so fat,' and they're half the size of you. I'm like ... I don't say anything."

- Mimi St. Pierre:

"The plus-sized section, you know, it's so spread out. People look at you. And you feel so embarrassed because you're in that section. Or people ask where you get your clothes sometimes, and you don't want to answer."

"We're using measuring cups and tablespoons to measure our food. We get a

visual idea of what we're supposed to be eating. Eventually on the last week, they'll take away the measuring cups."

"I've lost 24 pounds altogether after four weeks of camp. I have so much more energy."

- Meagan Wood:

"I'm looking to lose weight at my own pace and try to get a smaller waist so I don't feel embarrassed in certain places, like pools or crowded areas. That's why I wanted to come here (Active Challenge), so that I can learn how to lose weight."

"The canoeing trip was hard, the portages were hard. I didn't even know portage was a word."

"The morning hikes (were the hardest). I have ankle problems. Even though it's short, it's hard for me. I have very weak ankles so I have to wear ankle braces."

\_ Is your child overweight?

If you answer yes to any of the following questions, it may be a clue your child's weight is already challenging to them and may warrant professional help:

Signs your child's weight is affecting normal physical activity:

Does your child move slowly from place to place?

Does your child shy away from or avoid most physical activities?

Does your child have difficulty keeping up with friends during physical activity?

Does your child seem to breathe more heavily or get short of breath more easily than their friends during physical activity?

Does your child seem to sweat a lot or more easily than other children during physical activity?

Does your child become extremely flushed or "red in the face" during physical activity?

\_ Signs of overweight affecting normal social and emotional behaviour:

Is your child becoming distanced from social activities or from activities once

enjoyed?

Has your child been expressing any unusual signs of sadness, anger or frustration?

Is your child having any problems in interactions with other children?

Have your child's teachers and coaches expressed concern about any changes in your child's behaviour?

Is your child having difficulties concentrating at school or while playing sports or games?

Is your child hurting other children?

Source: Get a Healthy Weight for Your Child: A Parent's guide to Better Eating and Exercise, by Dr. Brian McCrindle and James Wengle, The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto

\_ Strategies to help prevent obesity in children:

Start early: "If women gain too much weight during pregnancy and their baby is too big more than 4,000 grams that large baby has an increased risk of being a large adult," says Dr. Tom Warshawski, chair of the Childhood Obesity Foundation ([www.cofbc.ca](http://www.cofbc.ca)).

Don't allow children to watch television until they are two years old. One hour of TV a day leads to an 18 per cent risk of obesity; more than two hours a day, a 36 per cent risk.

Don't put a TV in a child's bedroom. Limit TV and computer/video game time to one to two hours per day.

Limit sugar-sweetened beverages soft drinks, fruit cocktails and juice. Consuming one sugar-sweetened beverage per day increases risk of obesity by 60 per cent. Orange juice has the same amount of sugar as cola; apple juice, pineapple and grape juice have more sugar than a similar volume of cola.

Have regular mealtimes. Eat slowly to give the satiety centres a chance to signal your brain: "I'm full."

Try to ensure your child gets 60 minutes of physical activity per day. Get active, and be active with your child. Play Frisbee, walk the dog, go to the park, go for a bike ride, skate or ski.

Avoid foods high in trans fats French fries, margarine, vegetable shortening,

most crackers, cookies, pastries, breakfast bars, potato chips, pre-packed desserts, puddings.

Label a shelf in the fridge and another in the cupboard as ``snacks". Stock fridge shelf with fruit, sliced carrots and bell pepper strips, cheese and yogurt; stock snack cupboard with low-sugar cereal, graham crackers, dried fruit and a few small packages of salty and sweet snacks not bulk.

Sports drinks are unnecessary unless your child is doing endurance activities lasting longer than one hour.

\_ Helping an overweight child:

See your doctor and discuss your concern with your child's weight. Ask your doctor to check for signs of insulin resistance.

Reduce computer, video game and television time by 30 minutes per day initially, and then gradually decrease further until they take up no more than 90 minutes per day.

Whenever possible, be active as a family skating, hiking, biking, swimming, miniature golf, trips to the park.

Involve children in household chores.

Walk to school or shops when possible.

Encourage children to eat breakfast every day.

Offer more cereal fibre, fruit and vegetables and drink more water and low-fat milk.

Offer fewer high-fat and sweet foods and drink fewer carbonated drinks and high-sugar fruit juices.

Give healthy snacks such as fruit slices, carrot sticks, whole grain or low-fat baked goods.

Involve kids in planning and preparing meals.

Don't use food as a reward or punishment.

Eat home-cooked meals whenever possible.

Reduce fast food and sweet treats so they make up only a tiny fraction of your child's diet.

Get enough sleep children seven to 18 need at least nine hours, younger children more. Tired children are more likely to eat excess foods in search of more energy.

Ensure your child knows he or she is loved at any weight. Talk openly about the problem. Be careful your concern isn't interpreted as more criticism. Gradually make changes to your whole family's eating and exercise habits; don't make your child feel singled-out. Be a good role model with healthy eating and regular physical activity.

(Sources: B.C. Medical Association; Childhood Obesity Foundation; Dietitians of Canada; Get a Healthy Weight for Your Child: A Parent's Guide to Better Eating and Exercise; Our Overweight Children: What Parents, Schools and Communities Can Do to Control the Fatness Epidemic.)