

NEWS! NEWS! NEWS! NEWS! NEWS! NEWS! NEWS! NEWS! NEWS! NEWS! NEWS! NEWS! NEWS!

Obesity: Incidence, Occurrences & Effects on Campers and Staff



Gwenn Kudler Gelfand
LCSW

gwenn@gkudler-gelfand@sobelins.com

What a mild winter it has been!! It makes you feel like camp is right around the corner. In preparing for the upcoming summer season, thoughts about issues affecting our campers always surface. One in particular is the increase in overweight children and adolescents. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, obesity now affects 17% of all children and adolescents in the U.S. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry feels the incidence actually falls somewhere between 16% and 33% for all children and adolescents. Our government has spent over \$200 billion a year on obesity related conditions and diseases. The problem has only grown considerably. In recent years the rate of obesity has tripled.

So, how are we defining obesity and when is a youngster considered obese? A child or adolescent is considered obese when his or her weight is 10% higher than what is expected for their body type and height. I imagine many camp owners and directors are thinking to themselves “Well, this isn’t the population we see at camp,” but in reality, the incidence of overweight campers appears to have increased as well. In my visits to camps over the past few summers I have personally witnessed this trend with campers and counselors alike. In my own private psychotherapy practice I have also seen many children and adolescents struggling with recent weight gain who attend some of the very camps that Sobel insures. Many of these campers are the same ones that battled with anorexia the summer before.

There is a fine line between anorexia and obesity since both represent a youngster’s attempts to cope with emotional issues through food. We know that poor eating and a lack of exercise contribute to obesity. Camp is certainly a place for exercise and camps have been making great strides to offer healthy choice options at meals and snack times. We also know, however, that stressful life events – moves, deaths, abuse, bullying, separation and divorce – contribute to increased weight gain often resulting in obesity.

Consequences of this weight gain often include lower self-esteem, social difficulties, depression and other emotional problems. And, we know that campers are certainly not immune to these unfortunate experiences and their effects, both while at home and at camp.

So, what can we do with this information as camp owners and directors? For starters, we can increase awareness of the incidence of struggles with weight among many of our campers and counselors. According to statistics, this incidence has increased. It is important to be sensitive to this issue and the possibility that campers who struggled with weight loss the previous summer may be struggling with weight gain this upcoming summer. Young adolescents who may have been thin to average weight last summer may now be experiencing weight gain with puberty and their changing bodies as well. As a result, helping campers and counselors accept one's body and different body types is critical towards promoting self-esteem. Less emphasis on what one looks like on the outside and more on what kind of person one is on the inside helps reduce the teasing and bullying which is often associated with physical appearance. While at camp, campers see each other changing their clothes, coming in and out of showers, and their weight is apparent to others. Awareness of one's own and others' bodies is heightened as a result. Camper and counselor orientations should include this information to help promote positive body image and positive self-esteem. As always, education, vigilance and prevention is key.

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