

## Academy explores root of weight problems

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When I logged on to the Web site for the Academy of the Sierras, I was greeted by the smiling faces of several teenagers who had taken a brief recess from what appeared to be a hiking trip in the woods.

The seven girls and five boys appeared relaxed and cheerful in the photo. While they resembled normal teenagers — that is, what society defines as normal — the reality was they had much more than age in common.

Behind their veneers of contentment lie formidable truths: They are overweight or medically obese teenagers who have struggled with weight control most of their lives.

The Academy of the Sierras, a 68-acre campus in Reedley, Calif., 25 miles southeast of Fresno, is more than just a yearlong, private boarding school. It claims to be the first residential weight-loss program for teens ages 13 to 18, who are more than 30 pounds overweight.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control, obesity (clinically defined by a body mass index of 30 or above) among youths ages 6 to 11 has more than doubled in the past 20 years, climbing from 7 percent in 1980 to 16 percent in 2002. The rate among adolescents (age 12 to 19) more than tripled during that time, increasing from 5 percent to 16 percent.

Also, the American Obesity Association, a health advocacy group concerned with public policy, reports that approximately 30.3 percent of children are currently overweight (15.3 percent are medically obese); while 30.4 percent of adolescents are overweight (15.5 percent are medically obese).

The epidemic worries health and medical experts because the extra body weight carries risk factors: heart disease, high cholesterol and high blood pressure, as well as psychological problems such as depression and poor self-esteem.

Many therapeutic programs now target the alarming rise in child and teenage obesity. However, most offer only short-term or summer stays.

The Academy of the Sierras is under the umbrella of Healthy Living Academies, a company that runs many therapeutic programs including four summer camps in New York, North Carolina and California. A new camp program will be launched this summer in Michigan.

"There are many competing weight-loss camps and programs," said Sierras director Phil Obbard. "What sets us apart is that we find people who struggle with their weight and need programmatic change. We're treating students' problems from different angles and making a difference so they can be successful in continuing weight loss once they

are out on their own again."

The interdisciplinary approach includes an academic program, intensive behavioral training and comprehensive diet and activity management.

All three areas are critical in helping youths achieve long-term success, Obbard said, adding that students must uncover, understand and face the underlying reasons causing the weight gain or obesity.

"There is a reason behind the weight," Obbard said.

In other words, if students can't uncover the root of their weight issues, they will never be successful at fulfilling long-term weight-loss and weight management.

After listening to Obbard, I felt as though I had reached some sort of epiphany. It was as if the academy founders had uncovered the Holy Grail of a well-rounded and well-executed weight-loss program.

The schedule is strategic and methodical: From 9:30 a.m. to 3:25 p.m., students adhere to their daily individualized personal achievement plans and engage in a routine filled with set activities (ranging from weight training and water aerobics to cycling and canoeing).

They also attend core classes including math, English, science, history, psychology and social studies — with a twist. Woven into the curriculum are themes revolving around health and healthy living.

For example, in social studies, students explore the environmental factors contributing to obesity in developed countries.

Students also take elective courses, such as photography, horticulture, auto shop and culinary arts, which are designed to improve interpersonal skills and self-esteem, Obbard said. Class sizes at the Sierras are small, typically around 12 students.

As part of the diet component, students are introduced to a diet low in fat and high in fiber and protein, Obbard said. They can eat limited portions of "controlled" foods, including low-fat pizza, lean ground turkey tacos, fat-free bean burritos and other entrees. The goal is for students to eat equal, if not greater, quantities of "uncontrolled foods" such as fruits, vegetables, soups and salads.

As part of the program, students are expected to take responsibility for their food choices by engaging in "self-monitoring," a system in which students daily log what foods were eaten, how much was eaten, caloric intake and fat intake (in grams). The low-fat diet typically ranges between 7 to 12 grams of fat intake per day, depending on the student.

"Self-monitoring is self-awareness of what you are eating," Obbard said. "Research shows that if you self-monitor 75 to 80 percent of your meals, you will successfully lose or maintain weight. This is the benchmark we are looking for. It is part of a lifelong process."

Intensive behavior therapy examines emotions to get to the root of the problem. Each student meets twice a week with a behavioral coach and twice a week in a group session.

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