

## PENRITH "FAT CAMP" KIDS SHOW THEY ARE HUNGRY FOR CHANGE

**DESPERATE** families from across the UK and beyond are turning to the Eden Valley in search of answers to the modern epidemic of childhood obesity.

American-based company Wellspring has imported a model tried and tested in the States to bring Cumbria its first "fat camp".

About 30 overweight children and their families are pinning their hopes on a Wellspring camp based at the University of Central Lancashire's Newton Rigg campus, just outside Penrith, to put them on the road to healthier lives.

The first "students", aged between 12 and 17, arrived at the camp a week ago, five of them British and the rest from Kuwait, Greece, Belgium and Saudi Arabia. Ten more will follow shortly, mostly British, paving the way for others later in the summer.

All that the children have in common is that they are at least 20-30lb overweight and that they are hungry for change. While at the camp they can expect to lose on average 4lb per week.

The USA has long struggled with the problem of overweight children and teenagers, with a culture of consumerism spilling over into super-size portions and fast food. So called "fat camps" have traditionally focussed on frenetic sports-based activities to shift the pounds, but Wellspring claim to achieve more lasting long-term results by coaxing the children out into the natural environment to face a series of outdoor challenges.

Alongside this, students are encouraged to think about nutrition and to address their eating and lifestyle habits through behavioural therapy.

Jonathan Lynch, project manager with Newton Rigg's Frontier Education unit — which is partnering Wellspring to deliver the hands-on outdoor adventure component of the course — pointed out that the outdoors has been used to address people's mental and physical health problems for decades. "Outdoor therapy" was far from a new concept and had been tried and tested for many years, he said.

Supported by Frontier staff, students at the camp are able to try activities like ghyll scrambling, canoeing, rock climbing and fell walking, many for the first time in their lives.

According to camp director Deb Sweeney Whitmore, UK-born and with a background in Outward Bound, the children are encouraged to think of themselves as "athletes in training" and to push themselves outside their "comfort zones".

Much of what is achieved through the approach seems to be based on raising the students' self-esteem through channelling them and letting them enjoy a taste of success. This can also be a first for children who often do not fit the mould when it comes to traditional sports.

All the students wear a pedometer and targets are set in terms of steps taken each day, with children being rewarded for achievement, with incentives like access to e-mail, telephone calls home and leadership jobs within the group.

Farah (right), a 12-year-old schoolgirl from Kuwait, is enjoying her stay at Newton Rigg. "The instructors are really nice and they get you involved in really good activities," she said.

"The food is good as well. I've had buffalo burgers, potato wedges and a big variety of salads — oh, and lots of cereal bars!"

At home Farah admitted her big food weaknesses were chocolate and sweets which had helped her to gain a little much too weight "It was my parents' idea to come here but I also wanted to lose weight so that I could wear nicer clothes, which are important for a girl. I will remember what I have been taught about eating the right things when I go home."

Lisa (above), a 15-year-old schoolgirl from Belgium, found the camp from an Internet search. "I think it is definitely helping me with my confidence," she said. "I am quite a shy person and I am a few kilos overweight as well, which I want to lose. In Belgium I like a place called Quik, which is like McDonalds. I have learned about calories and also about portion control which is important. I thought I'd be really hungry all the time but I'm not at all. I like the yurts and the instructors are great — they really get you moving in the morning."

Obesity is a growing problem in this country and Wellspring see the Newton Rigg camp as a means of "testing the water" in the UK and Europe to see if there is an appetite for this type of solution.

Children can attend the Newton Rigg camp for either four, six, or eight weeks, during which time they will camp out in Mongolian-style yurts, enjoy action-packed days full of adventure and challenge and talk through what makes them overeat and strategies for breaking



But none of this comes cheap, with sessions all carrying a super-sized price tag. A four-week session at the camp will set parents back £2,900, with six weeks priced at £4,300 and the full eight week course costing £5,200.

Talking to Deb Sweeney Whitmore it becomes clear that the prohibitive cost of the camps, which would bar all but the super-rich, is something that Wellspring is keen to address. Already in the States part of the cost of such camps can be met through health insurance, and NHS funding is certainly an avenue that Wellspring would like to explore in this country. Another idea being floated is that of subsidised "scholarships", which could

be offered in future to eligible children living locally to a camp.

According to Deb, "desperate young people and desperate families" in the USA routinely resort to major surgery to solve their weight problems and the Wellspring solution is both a kinder and more lasting way forward.

