



The children who got too big

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By Pauline Holt

Abby Toon is a sweet-toothed 16-year-old who can cheerfully scoff six chocolate bars at one sitting when she feels like it.

But her love of sugar has turned the self-confessed chocoholic into one of the 20 per cent of British women who are clinically obese.

"I've had a problem with my weight since I was about six," says Abby, from Whitley Bay, North Tyneside.

"I've tried all sorts of diets but they've never worked. I've joined Weight Watchers and Slimmers World and while there wasn't anything wrong with the diets, I just could never stick to them.

"I eat healthy meals as my mum is quite health conscious but I binge on chocolate when no one can see."

Her mum, Jayne, was becoming increasingly worried about the health problems associated with her daughter's weight, particularly the risk of diabetes.

So when she found an internet reference to Wellspring Camps, an American summer weight-loss programme that was opening its first camp in Britain this year, she signed Abby up.

"Abby went from being a chubby six-year-old to putting practically a stone on every year," says Jayne, 38.

"I was at the end of my tether. I felt Abby's weight was completely out of control and that there was nothing I could do.

"I'd stopped having any rubbish in the house - no pop or anything - and I'd always tried to show her an active lifestyle. We have been skiing together and on surfing holidays. But I was starting to look like the nagging mum and I needed someone else to take over."

Wellspring's UK base, for 12 to 17-year-olds, is at the University of Central Lancashire's Newton Rigg campus near Penrith, on the edge of the Lake District.

Camp director Deb Sweeney Whitmore oversees the operation.

A native Brit, her baseball cap bearing the words "Fearless Leader" and frequent exclamations of "Awesome!" give away the fact that for the last decade or so she has worked in the US.

She dislikes the term "fat camp". Wellspring prefers "weight-loss programme".

Deb says: "These kids have already been scapegoated and they are trying to turn it around.

"It's a very courageous thing they're doing. Unfortunately our culture will always pick on the weakest link and there's this misapprehension that they are too lazy and it's their fault.

"But it's really about some of these folks having a compromised biology which is set up to store as much fat in their bodies as possible."

In just four weeks at Wellspring, Abby has shed two stones and is staying another fortnight in the hope of losing another 14lb.

Her parents' wallets will be a lot lighter as well by the end of her stay. A month-long course costs £2900, while Abby's six weeks cost £4300. Eight weeks is more than £5000. But the parents of these youngsters feel it's value for money.

The Wellspring approach combines diet and exercise along with nutritional education. Unlike other camps, it has psychologists on site to look into the reasons behind a child's overeating.

Deb and her colleagues hope to get the NHS interested in what they're doing. "NHS funding is an area we still want to develop," she says.

A key element is what Deb describes as "self-monitoring". Each person keeps account of the food they eat and its fat and calorie content.

"Our whole emphasis is that this is not a quick fix. It's about giving them life skills," she says.

So, as part of their nutritional education they're taken to a local supermarket for a lesson on food labelling and to a Penrith restaurant to find out how to make healthier choices. Debs says: "When the waiter comes up we ask critical questions like, 'How are your burgers cooked? Can we have them baked instead of deep fat fried?'"

Meals on camp are carefully balanced with "controlled foods" and "uncontrolled foods". Uncontrolled foods are fat free and the kids can eat as much of them as they like.

"But we don't feed them carrot sticks," laughs Deb.

"We do have burgers, pasta and pizza but cooked in a healthy way."

Abby and her friends stay in Mongolian tents, called "yurts" while on campus but three nights a week they're off camping in the wilds. That's when they're hiking, canoeing and abseiling as part of their exercise regime.

Ian Carter, programme director and a Penrith lad, says: "A lot of these kids have been put off traditional sport because they've been the last ones to get picked for teams. Here everybody comes from the same background.

"We break them in gently, teach them how to hike, how to canoe . . . and every time we go out we increase the challenge. Some have ended up climbing Skiddaw and Cat Bells."

Of course homesickness can set in. Abby admits she's really missed her friends and family - sisters Bridie, seven, Charlie, five and baby brother George - but she's made new friends from all over the world. This summer has seen people come from Norway, Cyprus, Kuwait, Georgia and even the Lebanon.

We were at the camp on parent's open day and Jayne hadn't seen Abby for a month.

"It's unbelievable," she said when she spotted her slimmed-down daughter in the sports hall. "She looks brilliant."

Blue Peter reports from the North Carolina Wellspring camp in September and Channel 5 has a documentary I Know What You Ate Last Summer coming out soon.