

# Dr. T. Kristian von Almen

## Author Gives Overweight Children New Confidence

**T.** Kristian von Almen, Ph.D., has been a skinny shrimp of a guy all his life. So when the self-described "rat psychologist" was invited to participate in a multidisciplinary treatment program for obese children, he balked.

"I went home and thought, 'Gosh, I love working with disabled kids, developmentally delayed kids and medically at-risk kids, but I don't know about overweight kids,'" the San Jose resident says. "My kneejerk reaction was that obesity was the ultimate in lack of self-control."

At the program's first meeting of a group of families and their children, von Almen found himself seated across from Adrienne, who at 14 years old weighed 280 pounds.

"She talked about the teasing from her peers and the discrimination she faced and it broke my heart," he says. "I realized that this was a physical disability and went home that evening like a puppy dog, with my tail between my legs."

Soon, von Almen, a research psychologist and former assistant clinical professor, was immersed in the development and implementation of a successful program for obese children at the Committed to Kids Pediatric Weight-Management Clinic at the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center.

After 15 years and a 70 percent success rate in the long-term control of childhood obesity, von Almen and his colleagues, Melinda S. Sothorn and Heidi Schumacher, have put their pro-

gram into book form and published *Trim Kids: The Proven 12-Week Plan That Has Helped Thousands of Children Achieve a Healthier Weight*.

### Involve the Whole Family

Childhood obesity is a treatable disease. But since treatment must be lifelong, the team found that the most effective approach was wholistic: combining healthy eating, increased physical activity, behavior modification ("positive attention for positive behavior") and the supportive involvement of the whole family.

"The book is about how to lose weight and maintain that," von Almen says. "It looks at nutrition and physical activity as lifestyle changes. But we also offer strategies and techniques that will equip kids and families to handle a lot of what life doles out."

A father of three, von Almen recently moved his family to San Jose from New Orleans. He is currently involved in creating programs to treat childhood obesity in Contra Costa and Santa Clara counties and looking into starting a local clinic in the Bay Area.

He is also a stay-at-home dad for his 3-year-old son, Dane.

"I've really noticed how much easier it is when your kid is glued to the television or computer screen," he says. "Along with eating, those things have become the modern day parents."

An early participant in the Committed to Kids program was a 6-year-old who weighed 220 pounds.

"Food was behavioral control," von Almen explains. "You feed a little guy a large pepperoni pizza and it takes him an hour to eat it and four hours to digest it. Pizza becomes the babysitter."

### The 'A-Factor' of Weight Loss

Rather than approaching over-eating from an addiction-based model of

## TRIM KIDS



The Proven 12-WEEK PLAN That Has Helped Thousands of Children Achieve a Healthier Weight  
by T. Kristian von Almen, Ph.D., Melinda S. Sothorn, R.D., Heidi Schumacher, R.D., L.D.N., C.D.E.; Harper Resource, 2001



treatment, von Almen centered the program and the book on the "A-Factor":

- positive Attention
- Accountability
- Attitude
- Availability

"What we as parents don't always understand is that the payoff for any behavior is our attention," he says, explaining that the negative attention kids get from unhealthy patterns continues to drive the unhealthy behavior. Once positive attention is introduced, the behaviors turn around.

"If no one's there patting you on the back, giving you those goosebumps and making you feel good about what you're doing, you can't do that for yourself," he says.

By teaching parents to reward kids, and to ultimately teach those kids how to pat their own backs, von Almen has seen the program lead many a child towards an experience of mastery.

Recently, a graduate of the weight-loss program came to see von Almen.

"He came into the program when he was 11 and now he's 20. He told me, 'Dr. Kris, do you realize that not only did you help me lose weight, but you helped me do things I never thought I could do?'"

Nancy Redwine is a journalist and freelance writer living on the Central Coast.

## Tips from Trim Kids

- **Work with a doctor.** A doctor should be involved in ascertaining how overweight a child is. Monitoring a child's height and growth during a weight reduction program is critical for health and safety.

- **Reach out to form a support network.** Enlist the help and support of teachers, coaches, scoutleaders, extended family and friends.

- **Set a good example.** Eat healthfully and become more active.

- **Don't coerce or hassle your child.**

- **Limit or control high fat and high calorie food in the home.** Have plenty of tasty low-fat, low-calorie food available.

- **Get the entire family involved** in being more active and eating more healthily.

- **Assist your child in making healthy choices.** This may be especially important at restaurants and fast-food spots.

- **Initiate physical activity in the evenings and on the weekend.** Invite your child to take a walk in the park or ride a bike with you.

- **Skinny doesn't necessarily mean healthy.** Developing good nutrition is necessary for good health. Losing weight is often a result of eating well.

- **Watch the numbers.** In general, if a product contains more than 15 grams of sugar or 5 grams of total fat per serving, it may be too high in sugar or fat or both.

- **Let kids be kids.** Children 12 years and younger should not be forced to participate in adult exercise classes or activities. They don't have the physical ability to exercise vigorously for long periods of time.

- **Reduce TV viewing.** A recent study found that if parents set a goal to reduce their child's TV time and then reward steps taken toward that goal, the child will lose weight.

- **Play now, work later.** At the end of the school day, kids need a break before doing their homework. Hand your children a glass of water and tell them to go for a walk, ride a bike, skate, play ball, jump rope, dance or play basketball for 30 minutes to an hour.

## Resources

- *Trim Kids: The Proven 12-week Plan That Has Helped Thousands of Children Achieve a Healthier Weight*, by Melinda Sothorn, Ph.D., M.Ed., C.E.P., T. Kristian von Almen, Ph.D., and Heidi Schumacher, R.D., L.D.N., C.D.E.; Harper Resource, 2001; [www.trim-kids.com](http://www.trim-kids.com).