

Book Review

For many children the days of playing outside after school until it got dark, then coming inside to eat a family dinner (while mom insisted “you finish that broccoli or else”) are a thing of the past. Parents and children now live in a world that seems to promote the consumption of energy-dense foods and to foster long hours spent in sedentary activities. The result is that obesity is a becoming a major public health problem, not only in adults but also in children and adolescents as well.

The Expert Committee on the Evaluation and Treatment of Childhood Obesity defines pediatric obesity as “excess body weight (adipose tissue) associated with adverse health or psychological outcomes.”¹ The committee recommends using Body Mass Index (BMI) to assess an individual child for the presence or risk of overweight. Children with BMIs exceeding the 95th percentile for age and gender are considered overweight. Those with BMIs falling between the 85th to 94th for age and gender are considered “at risk” for overweight.

Based on data from a survey conducted between 1999 and 2002, investigators at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta estimated that 31 percent of youth aged 6 through 18 were at or above the 85th percentile for BMI, and 16 percent were at or above the 95th percentile for body mass index.² In this context, there is a clear need for effective programs to help overweight children manage their weight.

While a number of approaches have been advocated and implemented in schools and communities, *Trim Kids*, by Melinda S. Sothorn, Ph.D., and colleagues, is a useful addition to the tools available to pediatricians and family physicians when they see children who are struggling with their weight.

The Author

Dr. Sothorn is Director of the Louisiana State University (LSU) Prevention of Childhood Obesity Laboratory at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, LA. She also serves as the Director of the Pediatric Obesity Clinical Research Section, and is a faculty member at the LSU Health Sciences Center in New Orleans. Dr. Sothorn has published many scientific articles in the area of exercise physiology and the treatment of pediatric obesity. She is a recognized expert in the evaluation and management of obesity in children.

Trim Kids, Melinda S. Sothorn, T. Kristian von Almen, and Heidi Schumacher. Harper Collins Publishers, New York, N.Y., 2001.

More importantly, however, Dr. Sothorn and her team have directly treated overweight and obese children for more than 15 years. This book is based on lessons learned from this extensive clinical experience. The language of the book reflects a deep expertise in talking to families and children about changing behaviors, not only in the child's life, but also in the broader context of the family.

The Approach

This book has no gimmicks. It gives solid, broad-based advice on how parents and children can really change their eating and physical activity behaviors. The book is divided into two parts. The first “sets the stage” for beginning a weight-management program in children. It emphasizes the role of the family environment in childhood obesity, as well as the role parents play in a successful program.

In fact, the book is primarily directed to parents. In a sensitive and thoughtful way, the authors address the common concerns about obesity that children and parents have. They introduce elements needed for successfully changing behaviors in children within a family context. Barriers and strategies for specifically changing diet and physical activity behaviors in children are also introduced. The general information about exercise and diet composition is easy to read and helpful. While the book's ideas grow out of concepts familiar to those who treat adults, the authors share important new insights and special considerations concerning treating children.

The second part of the book provides a detailed, specific 12-week program families can use as a roadmap for changing lifestyle behaviors to help their child lose weight. It is written in a style that is very structured and didactic. There are shopping and meal plans, exercise activities, and useful information on topics such as self monitoring, strength versus aerobic activity, eating out, kid problem-solving skills, and parenting skills. Specific instructions are given to families on seeking input from their pediatrician or family doctor before starting the program.

The intervention strategies suggested are not trivial. It may be difficult for some families to adhere to the program. Yet, the strategies are not unreasonable. By “setting

the bar” fairly high, the program is likely to be successful if followed. Overall, the strategies are comprehensive, useful, and likely to deliver results.

The Data

Dr. Sothorn has published a number of controlled trials in the area of pediatric weight loss.³⁻⁵ These studies did not directly test the “Trim Kids” program. As a result, the effectiveness of this program is not clear. However, the program is founded on widely accepted strategies that have been used in many weight loss programs in adults. (There are fewer studies and programs for children com-

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pared to those for overweight adults.) As a result, this program appears reasonable to suggest to families who have an overweight or obese child. There certainly are other very good weight-loss books for young people; over the coming months, they will also be reviewed in *OM*.

Summary

This is a well-written, comprehensive book that I would recommend to families. I enjoyed it more than I thought I would. I would also recommend it for anyone who treats overweight and obese patients—whether young or old. Since I do not treat obese children, I doubted I would find anything to enhance the care of the adult patients I do see, but this book proved me wrong. The insights about how families function as a unit, and how decisions about food and activity are made, were new to

me and useful for my practice. Women frequently come to see me about their weight. Often they are also mothers who are concerned about the health of their families. I now suggest this book to such women. For many of them, their role as mother is, perhaps, the most important in their lives. And mothers play a major part in modifying the health behaviors of family members.

While this book is not specifically a family-based treatment approach, it clearly addresses issues of family dynamics and the role of parents in the health behaviors of their children. It encourages parents to look carefully at their own food and activity behaviors. Since these suggestions are made in the context of advice directed at the child’s health, it may actually be more effective than advice directed primarily at the parent (although there is no evidence). When I hear a mother say, “I am worried about my whole family’s health,” I consider offering this book as one of the tools she can use to address her concerns and move forward. I highly recommend this book. ■

References

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