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Teenage Waistland: A Former Fat-Camper Weighs In On Living Large, Losing Weight, And How Parents Can (And Can't) Help



Synopsis

We've been inundated lately with books and articles about childhood obesity. Most offer cultural critique or nutrition and exercise advice; in tones that are alternately appalled and patronizing. Few address the psychological, medical, cultural and developmental complexities affecting overweight kids. The truth is, many parents already know that Whoppers are fattening. What they don't know is how to effectively help an often discouraged, often reluctant kid on what will be a difficult, life-long journey. Abby Ellin, a journalist and former fat-camper whose parents' attempts to "save her" from fatness proved counterproductive, has had a lifelong interest in figuring out how they might have done it better, and an abiding compassion for overweight kids. In *Teenage Waistland* she shares the story of her own adolescent struggle with food and weight, and journeys with hope, skepticism, and humor through the landscape of today's diet culture. She visits camps and community programs, and talks to experts, kids and their parents, seeking to answer these questions: What can parents say that kids will hear? Why don't kids exercise more and eat less when they're dying to be thinner? What treatment methods actually work? Willpower, or surrender? Shame, or inspiration? *Teenage Waistland* is ultimately clarifying and provocative for anyone who's ever wrestled with weight issues. One size does not fit all when it comes to weight loss, and the better we understand that, the more likely we are to be able to help our kids.

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Customer Reviews

Ellin, a freelance journalist and former fat-camper, wants parents of obese teens to understand a

few essential points. First, there's no single answer to the obesity problem — what's right for one kid may be useless for another. Don't shame obese children by calling them fat or out of control, or by putting them on highly restricted diets while other family members munch on fried chicken. Respect "nutritionally challenged" children, and focus on the many things to love about them. Teach them about living healthy, which involves more than just knowing which foods to pick. Ellin has researched fat camps (expensive but a relief from real-world struggles), behavior modification programs (difficult to keep up), gastric bypass surgery (effective but fairly dangerous), drugs (largely ineffective) and the "size acceptance" approach (theoretically fine, but maybe they're kidding themselves). The problem with this book may be that it's a little too honest — teenage obesity is not easily solved with a Frenchwoman's recipes for diuretic leek soup. Yet the author's compassion and her willingness to share her personal life, along with the book's appendix listing helpful resources, may bring comfort to many distraught parents. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

"A thoughtful, provocative and valuable account of subject that is too often beset by prejudice and hysteria." -- Paul Campos, Professor, University of Colorado and author of *The Diet Myth* "Abby Ellin has written a necessary road map for parents and their children who struggle with eating issues." -- Betsy Lerner, author of *Food and Loathing* "Ellin's funny, intimate and unblinkingly honest book is sure to help parents and kids wrestling with this issue." -- Alissa Quart, author of *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* "Its straight-forward perspective challenges our current views about weight loss, body image, and the manipulative societal pressures on our children." -- Emme "Teenage Wasteland is not just about Ellin's personal experiences...It's about the emotional effects of the various solutions." -- Los Angeles Times, June 14, 2005 "Written with candor, curiosity, and compassion... [and]reflects our own grown-up and insecurities around body and beauty, health and happiness." -- Wendy Shanker, author of *The Fat Girl's Guide to Life* "[Ellin] addresses the situation from a psychological, medical, cultural, and most important, understanding standpoint." -- Gotham Magazine, August, 2005 "A unique, empathetic perspective on this issue [Ellin] writes with compassion and humor about the trials of overweight kids." -- Bookpage, August 2005 "An honest, grimly funny report from a world that's lost all sense of proportion about fat." -- Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, June 6, 2005 "One part investigative journalism, one part self-help, and one part personal narrative, *Waistland* is intriguing...both eloquent and moving." -- The Boston Globe, September 18, 2005

An honest look at America's obsession with weight loss and how it affects the younger generation. The author, a former fat kid and fat camp survivor (though not a parent, as she acknowledges) explores various ways to lose weight from fat camps to nagging to behavior modification and surgery, among others. Sadly, there is no quick fix or even well-planned diet and exercise program that works for all, or even some. Due both to lack of willpower or incentive, and physical factors beyond the dieter's control, often the weight is lost then gained then lost again. "Teenage Waistland" lets the young subjects speak for themselves. It is a fascinating look at a controversial subject.

I work in public health and struggle to find resources that are useful. This is a great book for everyone. There is no magic pill and there is no easy fix - but there are LOTS of ways to make things worse. Until we have changed our social norms, our environment, and the availability and ease to make healthy choices, it's going to be a long, tough road. This book is a great read that describes what it's like to struggle with weight - good for those of us who are lucky and think our 5-8 pound struggle is horrible, as well as those who struggle with real weight challenges and are ready to hear the painful truth of a child's experience. Well done, Abby.

Prepare to laugh, cry and cringe --- but also to learn --- as Abby Ellin leads us through the landscape of obese teen life. First, though, a confession: When I volunteered to read this book, I feared that I was facing a hard, long slog through a dry tome packed with scientific studies on how to help an overweight kid drop a few pounds. Instead, I could barely put down this lively read. Ellin keeps a page-turning pace as she skillfully weaves her own story as a heavy, weight-obsessed teenager through the stories of other such adolescents. Ellin begins with her own family, who courageously support her by not challenging her right to tell the unvarnished truth about the ways in which her home contributed to her weight problems and food fixations. Interestingly, the family's attitudes toward weight resulted in the author's sister becoming anorexic. Even as Ellin grew larger and larger, her sister began dieting by third grade. Ellin's grandmother was a major influence on her self-image, withholding affections when Ellin gained weight. On visits to Grandma's house in Florida, Grandma weighed Ellin daily. At home, Ellin's mother obsessed over her own weight, restricted her diet and exercised before stepping on the scales each morning. She taped a photo of an obese woman on the refrigerator door. Both grandmother and mother repeatedly drilled into Ellin and her sister the dangers of gaining weight. As a child, Ellin was devastated when her grandmother told her she couldn't come to Florida for a visit at Christmastime unless she lost 15 pounds. The

ploy didn't work. Nothing really did, for many long, sad years. Ellin spent six years at weight-loss camps. She lost weight but also learned more about dysfunctional eating and how to do it (one counselor sneaked Ellin out to buy a cart full of candy and cookies because "Your body's getting used to the diet. You need sugar to give it a jolt."). In describing her fat camp days, she tells us the story of the owners of weight-loss camps, beginning with her visit as an adult with the man who ran the first weight-loss camp Ellin attended. During her visit, she talks with young campers, giving us the first of many insightful conversations with teens seeking to lose weight. What they say about their parents can make a reader weep. In *TEENAGE WAISTLAND*, we learn what has helped teenagers lose weight and, (heartbreakingly) more often, what has either not helped them or made them worse. Experts --- from fat camp leaders to directors of weight loss programs to bariatric surgeons, researchers and fat activists (and more) --- represent a variety of attitudes as each discusses the best way to help heavy adolescents. Ellin compassionately presents suggestions to parents on ways to support an obese child, all based on respect. Although there is not a single solution to such a complicated problem, reading this book is informative and helpful. It is a horrifying and fascinating study in our culture's warped attitude toward food and weight. Even if you don't have a child with weight issues, *TEENAGE WAISTLAND* is an engrossing read. --- Reviewed by Terry Miller Shannon (terryms2001@yahoo.com)

Simply put, Abby Ellin "gets it". She had a childhood relationship with weight, food, and family that stays with her, regardless of what the scale says today. She candidly tells her story, which isn't always a happy one, but it's often hilarious. When it comes to the "fat kid epidemic", the author doesn't claim to have all the answers, but is very willing to explore a variety of solutions. *Teenage Waistland* is tragic, eye-opening, humorous and true. Once you read the introduction: *Fat Kid Blues* - you'll be hooked, just like the author is on Hostess cupcakes!

This book was extremely helpful to me and my family. As the parent of an overweight child, Abby Ellin's insight as a "former fat kid" is a hands-on "what to do/"what not to do" primer for any parents dealing with these sensitive issues. You're never really sure what to do until you're faced with it head on and Ellin's book showed that it's the sensible approach that makes the most sense. Don't panic; don't over react (as is the most instant impulse). Just act sensibly. Well done!

This deft blend of memoir, sociology, and sharp cultural observation makes for a fascinating and at times heartbreaking read. *Teenage Waistland* will appeal to anybody who has ever had a distorted

or even just complicated relationship to food, eating, and body image...which is just about everybody I know. Really took me back to the high school cafeteria. The book is well written and moves quickly, with plenty of humor along the way. A five-star read.

I read the first part of this book; not all of it. I was hoping the author had personal experience with staying thin despite having been obese as a child, but this is not the case. The author was never fat; instead, she grew up in a dysfunctional family where she was pressured to be severely underweight. As a teenager, her grandmother forbade her to come on the family trip to Disneyworld unless she could get her weight down to 93 pounds. The grandmother did this even though the author's sister was dangerously anorexic and weighed less than 70 pounds. This book was not what I expected, but it is well-written and extremely useful as a reminder of just how much kids are punished for not being thin "enough".

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