

# 'Waistland' – humiliation doesn't help

By Brett Levy

Tribune Newspapers

American parents have heard the horror stories: a 12-year-old who weighs more than 250 pounds. An 8-year-old on blood-pressure medication as the result of excessive weight.

Meanwhile, the nation's researchers methodically churn out statistics measuring the country's ever-expanding waistline. More than 16 percent of children and teens 6 and older were considered overweight in a national health and nutrition survey released last year.

But while the obesity crisis is often reduced to sterile medical statistics and clinical observations, it's easy to forget that there are breathing human beings struggling to control their weight every day. And despite what the thin crowd might believe, those who are overweight, especially children, are painfully aware of their plight, Abby Ellin writes in **"Teenage Waistland: A Former Fat Kid Weighs In on Living Large, Losing Weight, and How Parents Can (and Can't) Help"** (PublicAffairs, 257 pages \$25).

There is no benefit from pressuring or humiliating overweight children, writes Ellin, who knows from personal experience: Her family and friends badgered her first for being too thin, then for becoming heavy.

In a series of vignettes, obese children tell Ellin that what they really want is for family and society to accept them as is, then empower them with loving support when they are ready to battle the bulge. If shame were all it took for a child to lose weight, most already would be thin, Ellin writes. In fact, she harps on this theme. It's a good message, but at times the lecturing is irritating.

In her introduction, Ellin explains that her obsession with weight began shortly after her grandmother in Florida insisted the preteen lose weight before being allowed to visit. Weight-loss camps helped her lose weight temporarily, but she also learned unwanted skills: how to hoard, lie, sneak, binge and obsess over food in ways that have haunted Ellin her entire life.

But "Teenage Waistland" is not just about Ellin's personal experiences, and it certainly is not about the mechanics of how to lose weight. It's more about the emotional effects of the various solutions, which range from weight-loss camps to stomach stapling.

Alas, most methods for losing weight not only don't work, she warns, they usually result in an even higher final weight. A smattering of studies, as well as personal research, back up most of Ellin's claims.

While Ellin approves of hospital-based behavior-modification weight-loss programs, she argues that those who succeed often gain the weight back at program's end, and insurance often doesn't pay the bills.

Perhaps the most drastic method of losing weight is bariatric surgery, commonly known as stomach stapling. By closing off or removing parts of the stomach and intestines, adults and teens who qualify often lose more than 100 pounds, although the possible complications from the surgery can be severe.

Ellin does squeeze in a few success stories in her closing chapters, but the average parent or teen isn't going to find much solace in "Waistland." That makes the book more honest on the emotional level, but it also may leave parents and children who are seeking help unsatisfied.

*Los Angeles Times*