

'Teenage Waistland'

Ithaca College graduate writes of teen weight woes

BY MIRANDA PENNINGTON

ABBY Ellin knows fat. An Ithaca College graduate (TVR major, writing minor, '89) who got her journalistic start freelancing for the *Ithaca Times*, Ellin spent many childhood summers attending various "fat camps" around New England. Though she was thinner than some, weighing at most 25 pounds over "normal," she worked with morbidly obese children who left camp every summer 30 pounds lighter only to return dejected the following year with 50 more to shed. Ellin conquered her weight shortly after college and has written *Teenage Waistland*, an exploration of parental roles in childhood and adolescent obesity, to express her take on the weight-loss culture and obesity problems in the nation today.

Growing up with a hyper-critical and severely weight-conscious mother, an anorexic sister, an insensitive father and a grandmother who began weighing Ellin daily at age 10, Ellin's food issues stemmed from an incipient familial understanding that fat was not lovable. She began dieting at age 12, following in the footsteps of her older sister who began when she was eight. Food was a substance to be monitored, obsessed over, and at Ellin's worst, regulated via "food" and "non-food" days where she was allowed to eat freely only every fourth day — the rest of the week, it was "yogurt and fat-free apricot bars."

Teenage Waistland, soon to be featured in *People Magazine*, and which Ellin discussed on the *CBS Morning Show* in June, is primarily directed at parents trying to guide their overweight child through the pressures of our fast-food-paced world. Her extensive interviews with professionals in the weight-loss industry are interspersed with her own personal experience of growing up ashamed and judged by her family. The book will resonate strongly with anyone who has struggled with weight, negative self-image, parental pressure to lose weight, or failed to maintain a healthy lifestyle for longer than a New Year's resolution. And in case that leaves anyone out, *Teenage Waistland* is a good read, an eye-opener for those skinnies who despise fat kids and the parents who "harbor" them.

Ellin quotes a multitude of experts, from "fat camp" owner Tony Sparber to doctors specializing in bariatric surgery (some feel it's the only option for the morbidly obese, others argue it's the cash cow of the weight-loss industry and rarely provides the promised results) as well as personal testimonials from "fat kids" (a term she uses early and often, perhaps to desensitize the reader) and their parents. She does not hesitate to cut in with her opinion whenever she disagrees with her findings — when another camp director extols the high rate of returning campers as

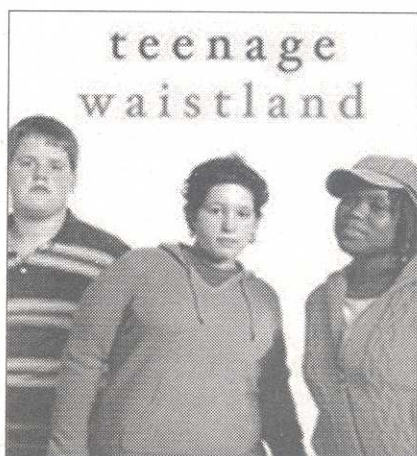


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A FORMER FAT CAMPER, ABBY ELLIN WRITES OF THE WEIGHT LOSS STRUGGLES OF TEENS.

encouraging, she interjects *sotto voce* "at \$6,000 a pop, of course it is." Her wry parenthetical commentary helps to subtly sift through surgeons, nutritionists and profiteers to expose the truth: There is no easy solution to childhood obesity.

She has some tips for parents on what *not* to do when helping their child attain a healthier weight and lifestyle, based on her own upbringing and fat kid feedback. First and foremost — love your children unconditionally, without shame or judgment. And don't call your child fat — they already know what they look like. Especially with older teens, any weight-loss program must be undertaken voluntarily — "the parents should be supportive, but the kid should be in control."

It's easy to identify with the discouraged parents who want their kids healthy, and the frustration of the kids themselves; in one chapter entitled "Mothers Against Fat Kids," we meet some mothers distraught over their overweight (but not obese) children. After listening to them, Ellin realizes that these women are failing to "address the emotional component of their child's weight problems."

This level of observation is what distinguishes *Teenage Waistland* from other studies of childhood obesity — Ellin's own emotional reasons for food-obsession having never been considered, she provides an aspect of being overweight that these mothers, unconsciously passing their own food problems down to their children, are unable to recognize.

However, the book ends encouragingly, with kids and their parents sharing personalized strategies and experiences. Some have lost weight, some have gotten healthier; some solutions were radical, others gradual. Most of the kids, including Ellin herself, have found some level of peace.

They've found that there is no "one size fits all," but there is at least one size that will fit them, even if they're not quite there yet. ■