



essential
Health



A breath of fresh air

A new support group is helping overweight kids transform their lives.

Shaping up ...
Katie Foreman-Vernon (above)
and Josh Hamm (far right).
Photos: Quentin Jones,
Domino Postiglione

Words Paula Goodyer

Fifteen-year-old Josh Hamm can now run around a football field without stopping. He feels not just fitter but happier than he did a year ago.

For this he can thank his new habits acquired with Loozit, a weight-management program for 13- to 16-year-olds developed by The Children's Hospital, Westmead, and run in Parramatta, Merrylands and the Hills District.

Loozit is the first adolescent weight management study of its kind in Australia. It runs eight weekly group sessions to motivate young people to eat better and be more active, followed by booster sessions once a term over two years. It's not Teen Boot Camp, nor about fast weight loss or strict kilojoule control, but is about laying down lifelong habits that promote long-term health.

"Research shows short-term weight loss doesn't work," says Loozit's program manager, research dietitian Janice O'Connor. "What works is changing habits and changing thinking – and it's easier to make changes in adolescence before habits become ingrained."

If you wonder why there aren't

similar programs in every suburb, it's because adolescent weight management tends to land in the "too hard" basket, O'Connor says. "You can't send adolescents to adult programs or put them on children's programs. We're doing this because no one else is."

It's also because Australia is still playing catch up in terms of tackling its collective weight gain, according to Professor Louise Baur, director of the NSW Centre for Over-



weight and Obesity and lead investigator into the Loozit study.

"[Being] overweight is the public health equivalent of climate change – it's complex and multi-faceted and, in terms of finding treatments, it's hardly on the radar," Baur says.

But preliminary results from Loozit show that it's working – so far there have been modest reductions in waist size (a more reliable sign of fat loss than weight loss) and improved self-esteem.

Hamm had wanted to lose weight for a while but didn't know where to start.

"I felt I could get the information but I needed strategies to put it into practice. This is where group discussions each week were helpful – we'd talk about how difficult it was not to eat junk food, then brainstorm ways to deal with it," he says.

But while his eating has changed, the biggest change for Hamm has been increased physical activity, he says. He now plays football three times a week and no longer has a lift home from school, instead he takes a 20-minute walk.

"I play handball at recess and lunch – before I used to sit around and eat. It was a gradual change. If you tried to do this overnight it wouldn't work. There were points after the weekly sessions were over when it was hard to keep things going by myself and there were times I got back into old habits but I snapped back," Hamm says.

Loozit works by encouraging small gradual changes. "Each week the kids are set small goals that are easy to achieve, like eating breakfast twice a

week or taking a bottle of water to school twice a week," O'Connor says.

"Then the next week we'd talk about it and ask 'did it work?' and, if it didn't, we'd talk about how we could make it work. It's a real confidence booster for kids if they make changes for themselves and see that they work."

Some aspects of Loozit are practical, such as decoding takeaway menus and learning that "battered", "crumbed", "extra meat", "extra cheese", and "creamy sauce" all mean too much fat. But it also works on changing thinking so young people learn that if they eat pizza, all isn't lost and they can still return to healthy eating, says dietitian Anthea Lee, who works with Loozit groups.

This tackles what she calls the "all-or-nothing" thinking that frequently sabotages weight loss attempts for both adults and adolescents. With the "all-or-nothing" approach you're either eating impeccably healthy food with nothing "bad" passing your lips or, if you lapse into eating chocolate and eat junk for the rest of the week.

Loozit also involves parents who meet separately to learn how they can support their children to change their habits.

"Many parents were worried about the long-term effects of their children being overweight," O'Connor says. "One mother said, 'I'm big now but I was skinny at my daughter's age. If she's already overweight, what will she be like at my age?'"

Many families need help to navigate what Baur calls a toxic environment. "It's hard for parents and for children when there's so much around them telling them to eat unhealthy food," she says.

For information about Loozit, contact Janice O'Connor on 9845 1291 or email loozit@chw.edu.au.

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Help begins at home

"I'm making better decisions for myself instead of listening to other people and I feel a lot more confident," says 16-year-old Katie Foreman-Vernon of Pendle Hill, who has lost eight kilos since beginning the program last year. "I started putting on weight in high school and although I'd try to change my eating, I'd go back to normal because of what was in the cupboard – chips and snacky foods. Now we have more fruit and wholemeal biscuits.

"I feel great about the weight loss. For someone of my age it was difficult to get information on losing weight. The magazines didn't have much and the internet has a lot of information telling you to not to eat certain food groups or don't eat carbs. At Loozit you're told you can eat everything but in balance."

"It's been a learning curve for me but I'm more organised with food and make sure there are always fruit, nutritious snacks, salads and little cans of tuna – things that Katie can tuck into her school bag," says her mother, Robyn. "I'm also better at substituting ingredients, like evaporated milk instead of cream, and making muffins instead of buying cakes."

Her only criticism of Loozit: "There wasn't enough of it – I think parents would have liked more time on it."

