

KIDS IN  CRISIS

Food is not the only

Parents face a major challenge in preserving an overweight child's self-esteem

THE KITCHEN was becoming an ever messier battleground for the Kelley family of Belle Harbor. Daughter Grace would have a snack — and then want another. Her tastes were all kid: sugary cereals, chips and other empty-calorie foods. The fights always ended badly: Grace, now 11, would cry, or her parents would throw up their hands helplessly. “Fine. You’re hungry, you want to eat that?” they would say. “Fine, go ahead.”

The tug-of-war is typical of households that include an overweight child, experts say. In such families, relationships may be strengthened or frayed over food. Without the right words and strategies to address a kid’s weight condition, the most well-meaning attempts can backfire, escalating family tensions. Parents can become tongue-tied. Children may balk at the suggestion that they need to lose weight, even though they are most likely acutely aware of their size.

“The fat kid is the extension of the parent,” said Abby Ellin, author of the new book “Teenage Waistland,” which explores how kids really feel about being overweight and diet programs.

“You can talk about health all you want, but for a lot of parents an esthetic argument is masked by a health [argument],” Ellin said. “Kids know when the parent is embarrassed and ashamed of them.”

BY JORDAN LITE
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in this? This could lead to you slimming down,” Kelley said. “It was never like, ‘If you don’t do this you’re going to wind up fat and unhappy.’”

For the Kelleys, the timing couldn’t have been better when they joined the Kids Weight Down program at Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, Kelley said. Grace’s older brother, Ryan, 19, had just left for college. Grace wouldn’t have to watch her rail-thin sibling swallow bowls full of ice cream while she limited her sweets.

“Our sense of who’s overweight has shifted because there

they have issues of their own with food, Klass said. Ideally, parents should be in agreement that a child must lose weight and be committed to making changes at home to help him do so. In the Kelleys’ case, everyone ate the same portion sizes as Grace; Kelley herself dropped 12 pounds, and her husband, Gene, lost a few as well, she said.

“Families have to be ready to do this,” said Dr. Bill Dietz, director of the division of nutrition and physical activity at the Centers for Disease Control.

The next step is visiting a pediatrician, who can determine the child’s body-mass index, which describes the relationship between weight and height. The doctor should also measure the child’s blood-sugar levels, cholesterol and blood pressure, said Lisa Altshuler, director of the Kids Weight Down program.

“Our sense of who’s overweight has shifted because there are a lot more kids who are overweight,” Altshuler said. “It’s not apparent just by looking at kids.”

Kids lose weight the same way adults do, by consuming less, eating healthy foods, and exercising more. But because children are still growing, maintaining a child’s weight is the first goal, and is considered a success in itself. Dietz said

RESOURCES:

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Healthy Kids, Healthy Future Resource Guide, including multilingual, insurance-accepted and sliding-scale weight-loss, nutrition and exercise programs for children in the five boroughs: www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/diabetes/diabetes-healthykids2004.pdf

■ **South Bronx Fitness Resource Directory:** www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/cdp/cdp-resource-sobronx.pdf

■ **Shape Down:** www.shapedown.com

■ **Downstart Weight-Loss Program at SUNY Downstate Medical Center:** (718) 270-6306

■ **NYU Child Study Center Pediatric Weight-Management Program:** (212) 263-8916

www.aboutourkids.org/clinical/weight-manag.html

■ **Maimonides Medical Center Kids Weight Down program:** (718) 283-8020

www.maimonidesmed.org/clinicalservices/Pediatrics/PedKidsWeightDown.htm

■ **South Bronx Center for Children and Families:** 718-991-0605
<http://montekids.org/programs/sbhccf/>