

Move It and Lose It!

Slidell Memorial Fights Childhood Obesity
With Its Innovative Fit As A Firefighter Summer Camp



By:
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Growing up is hard. Growing up different—overweight, for example—can be nothing short of painful. With its week-long Fit as a Firefighter Summer Camp, Slidell Memorial Hospital and the St. Tammany Fire District 1 are doing what they can to get overweight children in our community not just moving, but moving in the right direction.

According to the Louisiana Council on Obesity Prevention and Management, 17 percent of children in our state are obese or overweight. Obesity can lead to a number of serious health problems as our children grow to adulthood. The future can hold diabetes, heart disease, osteoarthritis, respiratory problems, sleep apnea—even cancer.

Of course, obesity can take an emotional toll as well. Boys and girls with weight problems typically lack self-confidence, and have trouble being accepted by their peers. They are often the brunt of cruel jokes at school. As a result, it is common for kids with weight problems to suffer from depression and anxiety. They grow up feeling unattractive, ignored, and hopeless.

According to Michelle Partridge, RNC, Director of Women and Children's Services at Slidell Memorial Hospital, being overweight can also

performance at school. "Some kids may become disruptive, while others become introverted—afraid to take risks," she explained.

This summer, 80 youths between the ages of 7 and 12 will take part in the Fit as a Firefighter camp, which was co-founded by Partridge and Fire District Chief Larry Hess. The camp, which runs July 7 to 11 at the Louisiana National Guard and District 1 Fire Training Academy located at Camp Villere in Slidell, filled within days of opening up registration, showing that parents are hungry to find ways to help their children learn life skills to develop healthy habits. Additional participants in the program include Slidell Police SWAT and K9 teams, the Louisiana State Troopers, Cross Gates Athletic Club, LSU Ag Center, Acadian Ambulance, Cancer Association of Greater New Orleans, Slidell Kicks TaeKwondo Center, SMH Parenting Center, Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries, U.S. Coast Guard, Tammany Twirlers, Pearl River Line Dancers, Smoothie King, and the Louisiana National Guard. The program also received support from Rotary Club of Slidell-Northshore, SMH Women's Health Alliance, Ferrara

Fire Equipment Company, Volunteers of America and Junior Auxiliary of Slidell. Camp Director Taffy Morrison, a parent educator with Slidell Memorial Hospital's Parenting Center, is grateful to the organizations helping to make the camp possible.

"I can't think of another community in the country who has come together to offer a program like this," Morrison said. "It is truly innovative."

Fit as a Firefighter aims to teach children how they can build up their self-esteem through proper diet, exercise and a can-do attitude. Unlike what used to be called "fat camps," Fit as a Firefighter focuses on more than numbers on a scale. The camp gives kids and their families the tools they need to live happier, healthier, safer lives. Also, unlike other weight loss camps, which can cost thousands of dollars, Fit as a Firefighter is free to the first 80 children who qualify.

"We didn't want to have to turn anyone down because of money," Morrison explained. "If a child fits the physical criteria and there's space available, that space is theirs."

Partridge and Hess came up with the concept for Fit as a Firefighter while exercising one day at the gym. Hess mentioned that he had seen a program on the Discovery Health Channel about a weight loss camp for overweight kids and it got him thinking about the childhood obesity problems he sees right here in our own community, and what his department could do about it.

"Fire departments of today are all-hazard agencies—we do more than put out fires. If there's a flood, a car crash, an EMS call, a technical rescue, we're there. It just made sense to me for us to take on this epidemic of

childhood obesity. I'd rather help a kid learn to take care of his heart now than respond to a heart attack later on."

The wheels in his co-founder's brain started turning. Partridge told Hess, "Give me a shot at this. I think we can make this happen."

Partridge brought the idea to her team at Slidell Memorial, and then began the potentially difficult task of encouraging other community sponsors to come on board. As it turned out, the community was very supportive. Morrison said, the idea caught on "like wildfire," and now, in its second year, the camp has received support from dozens of agencies and organizations.

To Chief Hess, changing the life of a child is its own reward. "To see a kid who can't do one sit-up on Monday be so proud to be able to do that sit up for his daddy on Friday is

emotionally

overwhelming. In the 42 years that I've been serving the community, that first

we have them simulate what we do as firefighters. They drag a hose, we have water bucket relays, and then there's 'Save the Baby,' where they negotiate their way through a maze with a doll."

The program also includes daily nutrition classes by a certified dietician and workouts with top-notch fitness trainers from Slidell's Cross Gates Athletic Club. Plus, the week is filled with visits from guest speakers from the community who educate, motivate and entertain.

Campers learn personal safety, including CPR and First Aid training, boating and community safety. They benefit from fun activities such as

karate, water games, and line and square dancing. The kids also participate in a cooking class where they learn to make healthy snacks. And a social worker is on hand to lead discussions and talk to the children one-on-one on the emotional aspects of being overweight.

"We talk about how

campers to be able to compete as equals, and to be able to relate to one another in a non-judgmental way. For many kids, this will be the first time in their lives they'll win a race or won't feel self-conscious among their peers."

Partridge added, "Our campers leave with a real sense of belonging. They make a lot of friends, learn skills that will lead to a healthier lifestyle, and have more self-confidence."

In addition, this year's group of campers will learn about the dangers of smoking and tobacco use. According to everydayhealth.com, 90% of adult smokers started smoking before the age of eighteen, and, of smokers under 18, more than six million will die prematurely from a smoking-related disease. Compared to other states, Louisiana is on the high end when it comes to the number of teens who smoke. Fit as a Firefighter hopes to enlighten kids before they light up for the first time.

But kids aren't the only ones the camp educates. The United States Department of Health & Human Services stated that 80% of overweight children have at least one overweight parent—and it's not just genetics. Researchers at Arizona State University found that when children grow up in families with poor eating habits and lifestyles dominated by television watching and video-game playing, they are 33.3% more likely to become overweight or obese. In addition, many parents of obese children are in denial—refusing to see a problem. That's why Fit as a Firefighter seeks to educate the parents as well as the child not only at camp but through special nutritional sessions just for parents.

"We aren't here to put the parents on a guilt trip, but, like our dietician says, the kids aren't the ones doing the grocery shopping. They're not the ones going through the drive-thru. Children need educated and supportive family members to help them lose the weight and keep it off. We give families what they need to succeed together," Morrison said.

Can one week change a life? Perhaps not, but it's a healthy start.



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week at camp was one of the most satisfying I've experienced in my entire career."

Unlike most summer camps, Fit as a Firefighter offers more than basket weaving and archery. And the counselors aren't a bunch of teenagers—they're firefighters, real life heroes in the community.

"People have this image of young, hunky firefighters, and kids want to emulate us," Hess explained. "We're not professional athletes, but we're certainly occupational athletes. In order to get the kids up and moving,

to deal with a bully—things like that," Hess said.

Partridge explained that Fit as a Firefighter is "more than a babysitting service" and that, by the end of the week, "you can actually see definite signs of growth. On the first day, the kids bring things like potato chips and candy bars in their lunch bag. By Friday, they're asking their moms to pack fresh fruit and carrot sticks."

The camp only accepts those children with a real need. "We want the kids to feel comfortable at camp," Morrison explained. "We want our