



CHAPTER 1

HAVE HOPE!

An Effective Solution to a *Big* Problem



Sarah became obese as a toddler. She had diabetes at 7 years of age. Her first hospitalization for diabetes occurred when she was only 8. Her high blood pressure began at age 10. Her family's lack of attention to these problems led to asthma, heart problems, and scores of hospitalizations. Finally, at age 14, Sarah's body gave out. Her last hospital stay was for a diabetic coma that led to a massive heart attack.¹ Walt Larimore, M.D., sounds the wake-up call by publicizing this heartbreaking story.

This generation of children faces a future of unprecedented medical consequences related to obesity. Diseases previously seen only in adults, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, cholesterol abnormalities, and many others, are now occurring in children. For the first time, experts are seriously examining whether our current generation of children will have a decreased lifespan due to issues related to being overweight.² We are now testing for diabetes in children as young as two years of age.

In addition to the medical challenges that are part of childhood obesity, the emotional impact felt by children and families can be devastating as well. Perhaps you know this all too well. You may have an overweight child in your life—a son, a daughter, a grandchild, or someone in your circle of close friends. You may not know whether to weep, scream, pray, or run and hide! You may be desperately searching for answers for what seems like an insurmountable problem. If so, you aren't alone. Statistics indicate that *lots* of children are overweight, with one out of five now facing obesity.

In the midst of this harsh reality, we want to give you an infusion of hope. We want to turn your fears into resolve, replace your uncertainty with a clear plan, answer your confusion with the facts, and let the power of hope inspire and uplift you. Today you are invited to take the first step on the path of raising a healthy, lean, fit child, and we want you to take this journey, secure in the firm belief that this is something *you can do!*

First of all, *this is not a diet*. All of those “how to lose weight quick” ideas need to go directly into the garbage can. Ditch the food scale. Forego the low-carb versus low-fat debate. Stop counting your child's

calories. You may have already discovered that diets can be expensive, frustrating, guilt-inducing and ineffective in the long run. Welcome to a refreshing, effective, time-tested alternative.

So, how do we move from propaganda and failure to an approach that will achieve the results you are looking for? The answer will become clearer with each page of this book.

Let's start at the beginning—literally: *Your child is well made*. When God finished creating humankind, He didn't say, "It's okay" or "It's not bad." Not at all. Instead, God looked at what He created and said, "It is very good" (Gen. 1:31). We suspect you believe there is no child in the world as wonderful as your own. But did you realize that your child is God's masterpiece—an awesome, intricate creation designed for health and wholeness? Our steadfast hope for your child is firmly based on this foundation.

God also created an incredible variety of nourishing foods for us to enjoy. Some foods are full of nutrients and vitamins, and others are not. Some foods taste good and others feel good. Few foods are all bad and few are all good.

Food is like fuel. Some are high quality and cost more; some are low quality and cost less (lately they all cost a lot!). While our bodies can usually run on whatever we put in the tank, we will run more efficiently and last longer with good fuel (proper nutrition) and regular maintenance (proper exercise).

Despite having well-designed bodies and quality foods readily available, we as a society are out of shape and in the midst of a health crisis. Why? The answer is a sad indictment of the American way of life. The popular media sends us so many mixed messages that we end up being thoroughly confused when it comes to understanding nutrition and the human body. Many of us aren't interested in exerting the effort required to be healthy, having been bombarded with the message that we should pursue whatever makes us feel and look good, preferably as fast as possible. We're encouraged to do whatever we want, whenever we want, and to stop whenever we darn well please. If consequences of such behaviors arise, hopefully there is a pill or some other quick fix readily available. Our culture doesn't advocate delayed gratification or

self-control, whether we're talking about eating, work, relationships or shopping.

As the world around us pursues the feel-good lifestyle, our health is suffering. Quick fixes work for a short time and then trigger an inevitable breakdown. All the while our bodies are trying to send us messages that all is not well. "Hello, up there? That's enough! Could you stop shoveling in more food? Let me get a little rest. And take me out for some exercise . . . please!"

The problem is, we're too busy keeping up our frantic pace of life. It's time to *slow down*—to make the effort to point our children toward the path of health by tuning into their God-given signals of hunger and fullness. In the process, the entire family will benefit from discovering what God really intended when He brought your little masterpiece into this world.

What's the Big Deal?

While many may feel overwhelmed at the notion of attempting to deal with an overweight child, others (perhaps within the same home) may question why being obese is of such concern. We live in a wealthy country with an abundance of good food and we're all getting bigger. So let's just be "large and in charge." Make bigger clothes, bigger cars and larger refrigerators; build bigger bathrooms, bigger chairs and super-sized caskets! Be fat and happy. What's the big deal?

Consider the impact of the following words: "Fat." "Obese." "Huge." "A cow." "Overweight." "Plump." "Chunky." "Plus-sized." "Heavy." "Stout." "Extra large." These are words that can be used in many different ways—on a menu, in a movie title or in everyday conversation. Some could even be a medical description or a compliment. They don't evoke an emotional reaction or convey judgment. These are *just words*.

Yeah, right!

These are *not* just words to anyone who has ever experienced the pain of being overweight. How does our culture feel about those who are overweight? An unsettling answer to that question occurred during the Obesity Treatment and Prevention conference in Seattle, Washington,

in 2004. During a lecture, the speaker passed out blank index cards to healthcare professionals and asked each person to complete the following sentence: “People who are overweight are _____.” The responses were *absolutely stunning*. While a few were positive, many were negative—and some were downright mean: “Pigs.” “Ugly.” “Unhappy.” “Hopeless.” “Unmotivated.” “Lazy.” “Scary.” “Impossible to help.” And these answers came from healthcare workers who wanted to learn how to *help* those who are overweight! That being the case, can you imagine the answers a class of fourth-graders might give to the same type of question?

Well, imagine no longer. When a group of 10- and 11-year-old children were asked to study pictures of children with varying disabilities and rank them in order of acceptability, the obese child was rated below all the physical deformities, including a missing hand and facial disfigurement.³ It gives a discouraging slant to the old saying, “I’d give my right arm to be thin.” Your child, or perhaps his best friend, may indeed feel the same way. Our culture places a tremendously high priority on physical appearance.

If these two disparate groups—professional healthcare workers and elementary school students—are an indication of the prevailing opinions of our society, then our overweight children face a difficult struggle against deeply ingrained stereotypes. While we desperately wish that this weren’t the case, we need to recognize the battles our overweight children are facing. It is a *very* big deal.

Your Child, God’s Masterpiece

If your heart is feeling pierced, please know: God knows and cares deeply for all children and He is *crazy* about your child! Amazingly enough, He loves your child even more than you do. That’s almost impossible for us to comprehend, but it is incredibly reassuring. So we ask: Who better to be in charge? Throughout this book, we will emphasize the following concept: God created your child. Let’s turn to Him for help in understanding how your child’s body was designed to work.

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed (Ps. 139:13-16).

Your child has a bright future designed by our loving, all-knowing and all-powerful heavenly Father. Regardless of the obstacles in your path, God is on your child's side.

Picking up this book is an important beginning. You have taken the first step toward setting your child free from diets and other subtle entrapments, and you are embarking on a path of truth that will bring health and wholeness to your child.

The Fit Kids Method

Our approach is simple but not necessarily easy. It is faith-based and grace-oriented. It's not a diet, and it's not about rigid rules or harsh treatment. You will need no special food, no special recipes, no carb or calorie counters. Nor will we encourage a sudden change to making macaroni and cheese with whole-grain pasta and cheese substitutes (which six-year-old Jessica pronounced "gross"). The only "equipment" you will need is your child (and his or her brain, mouth and stomach) and your own willingness to guide her on the God-intended path to health.

Raising Fit Kids in a Fat World is based on a threefold approach called the "three senses"—*science* sense, *common* sense and *God's* sense. This approach will be woven throughout this book.

Science sense means sharing medical facts that are available from the leading experts in the field of obesity, studies from current medical literature, and our clinical experiences in counseling and treating patients. In Medical Moments, we discuss the latest findings pertaining to

specific issues. Although it is our intent to provide the most accurate scientific information available, please remember that you should always rely on your pediatrician or family physician for specific medical advice.

Common sense utilizes time-tested principles that directly apply to your day-to-day life situations. Our Common Sense Corner is a place to “be real” and will teach you to raise a fit kid in the midst of a crazy, hectic, confusing world.

God’s sense is the foundation that underlies everything. It is ultimate truth put into place by God our Creator, demonstrated to us by Jesus, explained to us through His divinely inspired Word and whispered to us through the Holy Spirit. Throughout the book, Spirit Moments will offer a godly perspective on many different situations.

The three senses are complementary, not contradictory. When woven together, they form a threefold bond of incredible strength and durability that you can rely on throughout your journey toward better health.

Raising Fit Kids in a Fat World will first focus on teaching your child to eat the *right amount* of food by learning to recognize his internal signals of hunger, satisfaction and fullness. Children who are overweight will begin to eat less food and, as a result, will gradually attain their appropriate, God-intended size. Children who are a normal weight will simply remain so and avoid the epidemic of inappropriate weight gain that is sweeping our nation. Your child will also learn to eat the *right types* of food by learning to choose and enjoy wise choices. We will dispel many myths associated with nutrition and look at what the medical community has to say regarding how different foods affect the body. And you and your family will learn to *be active* on a daily basis, allowing your child to drop any excess weight, improve cardiovascular health and be the fit kid that he surely wants to be. (These concepts and many more are part of the Fit Kids Triangle, which we will present in chapter 7).

One of the greatest challenges that children (and adults) face in our culture is eating the right amount of food. It’s fairly obvious that children who are overweight need to eat less. But how? By counting points? Restricting calories? Calculating the glycemic load? We will examine different aspects of diets later on, but the focus for now is to teach your child to eat less without being on a rigid diet and to attain a healthy, fit size.

Think for a moment about your family's eating habits, particularly as they relate to your child. Do you tend to feed your child based on what the clock says, or based on her hunger needs? On the flip side, does the meal end when your child has finished everything on her plate, or when she is satisfied? We are all born with the natural ability to feel hunger, seek nourishment and stop eating when satisfied. But if your child gets in the habit of eating whether or not she is hungry and continues eating beyond the point of physical satisfaction, then her natural, God-given signals will be overruled, and your child will frequently choose to eat *too much* food. The result will be excessive weight gain.

Over the next few days, notice whether hunger and satisfaction even play a role in your children's desire to eat. As you become more conscious of your family's eating habits, you may become aware of mistakes you have made. If so, don't sweat it. All of us have "been there and done that." Recognizing a mistake is the first step toward correcting your course.

To help your child learn how much to eat, we will utilize two models: the young infant who instinctively knows when and how much to eat, and the naturally thin adult who maintains a healthy, God-ordained size by consistently eating only that which the body requires. As we explore these models, you will begin to appreciate the miracle of the human body. Our bodies are not perfect—we've lived in an imperfect world far too long for that—but the basic design is amazing. As your child learns to recognize and respond to the God-given sensations of hunger and satisfaction, he will begin eating the right amount of food.

As you learn more about hunger and satisfaction, it will become obvious that we often use food not to satiate physical hunger, but to meet emotional needs. We used to be taught, "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade!" Now, we are more likely to hear, "When life hands you lemons, you *owe it to yourself* to eat an entire lemon pie!" Learning to deal with emotional needs in a manner that does *not* involve food is one of our most important challenges. We face stress and temptations on a daily basis, and so do our children. When faced with difficulties—or even when celebrating success—your child can learn to turn to God, rather than to food, to meet his innermost longings.

We usually turn to God when we experience a serious illness, financial crisis, loss of a job, or a death. But if we have a “bad hair day,” break up with a boyfriend, fail to make the basketball team, have dealings with a grumpy coworker or wake up to cranky kids, it’s much more likely that we’ll seek consolation in chips or cheesecake. We have all done it, but does it really make sense?

Teaching your child to turn to God for help with everything from the daily hassles to the life-altering catastrophes allows your child to experience God’s many faces: friend, confidant, counselor, rescuer and savior. Of course, you can’t give what you don’t have. So if you don’t feel as close to God as you would like to be, you might begin closing that gap by talking with Him daily about the little, everyday things that bother you rather than seeking Him only when a crisis occurs. He cares about every detail of our lives, listens to our every word and loves to be in relationship with you and your child. In fact, that’s the reason He created each and every one of us. As you and your child draw near to God, everything else in life will begin to fall into place.

You may feel that getting involved in a faith-based weight-loss program is risky. If you mess up, will you have failed your child *and* failed God? A thousand times, *no!* Remember, God’s love for you and your child *is not based on appearance, performance or success*. His love is real, pure, perfect, and there isn’t anything any of us can do to change that. It is love based on His unending grace and mercy that cannot be fully understood—only enjoyed and appreciated. The more we know of His sovereignty, love, mercy and grace, the more we will want to follow His precepts and take proper care of our wonderfully made bodies.

The Madness

If we all employed a full-time cook and lived in a controlled environment with a personal trainer at our beck and call, it would be much easier for us to be fit. But for most of us, life just isn’t that way! We all need to get fit and stay healthy, even in the madness of day-to-day living. For this reason, our approach to a healthy lifestyle is practical, adaptable and suitable for every facet of daily life.

To put our concepts into practice, we have designed tools to help convey specific ideas to your child.

- The Tummy Keys will help your child eat less food by showing him to pay attention to what his body is saying.
- The Belly Meter will give you a language with which to teach even a very young child to recognize when her stomach is empty, satisfied or too full.
- The Fun Jar and the Motion Monitor will help you adopt an active lifestyle with an adventurous spirit.
- Stop, Drop and Roll will address needed behavior changes within your family and equip you to make those changes a reality.
- The Word Wand will give you specific ways to better communicate with your child.

These tools will provide practical, simple ways to integrate the Fit Kids method into your child's daily life, as you begin to appreciate that preventing or treating childhood obesity involves not just nutrition, but also behavior modification, clear boundaries, good parenting skills and a great deal of commitment and prayer by the entire family.

Yet having your child come to terms with his weight-related issues can be a challenge. For this reason, underlying everything must be lots of unconditional love, honesty, wisdom, patience and perseverance. As we address behavior changes as they relate to your child, we will seek God's guidance in dealing with a variety of challenging food-related issues.

Ultimately, understanding hunger and fullness will become second nature. But there will always be obstacles lurking around the corner. Just when you think you have it under control, life happens—stress, vacations, money problems, holidays, divorce, death, and other challenges. An effective weight-loss and weight-maintenance method works during the good *and* the bad times. We plan to give you strategies to

meet these inevitable and unexpected stresses in life that might otherwise defy your commitment to your child's health and fitness.

Wanting It All

A popular sweatshirt reads, "Dear Santa, I want it all." Does that ring true for you? Many of us want a loving family, a big house, the cool car, an awesome job, the best friends, and lots of great vacations thrown in for good measure.

Is it wrong to want the good life for you and your child? Not necessarily. God gave us a beautiful world to enjoy, and desiring good things for ourselves and for our families is normal. Accepting the gifts God has given us and using them wisely is appropriate. Wanting it all, however—that's another matter entirely. We live in a country that has more of everything than almost any other place on the face of the earth. Some would say we "have it all." But are we happier? Not even close. Why is that? In wanting it *all*, is it possible we have forgotten what it's really all about?

Does this hold true when it comes to our dreams for our kids? Why *do* you want your child to be fit? Is it out of love and a genuine desire for physical and emotional well-being, or is it so that the family meets the worldly requirements of outward success? Are you fostering your child's God-given gifts and talents, or are you expecting her to fulfill a dream of your own making? Are you pressuring your child to obtain unrealistic accomplishments in your attempt to have it all?

When children are raised with *high* worldly expectations and *low* levels of affirmation, they may perform to perfection outwardly, but inwardly they are forever striving for that which they cannot attain or sustain. This may lead to worsening obesity or to conditions such as anorexia/bulimia, a heartbreaking outcome for any child and one we all want to avoid.

Wanting It God's Way

There is a breathtaking alternative to the rat race that comes with wanting it all, and that is *wanting it God's way*. In today's culture this choice is the narrow path that is sometimes portrayed as backward

and “un-cool.” Yet those who choose it experience profound peace and contentment.

This way isn’t easy—nothing worthwhile ever is. This choice begins with the recognition that our deepest longings aren’t met by worldly success but by knowing God. As you seek God first, you will probably feel as though you are swimming upstream, fighting a strong “me-first,” materialistic current. And yet, as you implement God’s plan for your beloved child, he or she will be transformed into someone who chooses to resist temptation, looks beyond self, reaches out to those in need, and stands strong on godly principals of truth. The end result for both you and your child will be peace, contentment, joy and wisdom.

Let’s Do It!

So what’s it going to be? Do you want it God’s way? Will you take the plunge and make the commitment to raise a spiritually and physically fit child? If so, this will be a significant turning point for you and your child, as you teach him to love the amazing body God created, to enjoy good food and to live life to the fullest. Finding freedom from the “wanting it all” rat race, rigid food rules, the me-first mentality, and the prison of obesity will be absolutely exhilarating. God’s way will always be worth it, will never disappoint and will leave you more than satisfied. It’s time to set your child free!

The Lifeline of Prayer

You are not alone. God knows all your cares, heartaches, joys and sorrows. Let Him take on the burden you’ve been carrying and infuse you with the peace that comes only from Him.

When you are faced with a melt-down situation, or when the kids are completely out of control and demanding a run to McDonald’s, don’t despair or give up. Instead, look up. What God desires from us more than anything else is not perfection but a *relationship* with Him. Talk to God constantly—about the good and the bad, your fears and

dreams, your successes and your failures. He will lovingly guide you as He comforts you with His presence.

*Father, You know the struggles we're wrestling with
and what makes us feel uncertain, scared, happy and sad
as we try our best to be good parents.
You custom made each child to be unique.
Give us Your peace as You quiet our fears
and help us believe that our children are Your masterpieces
and that You know what is best.
Help us to turn to You for all of our needs, big and small.
Thank You for Your unconditional love and amazing grace.
Grant us Your peace and help us to choose to live life Your way.
Amen.*

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7