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**R**EALITY weight loss TV shows are akin to weight loss rehab. While they may give viewers hope that a good diet and exercise can help them lose weight, they are in fact divorced from reality and can have some unintended effects on young people.

Programs that promote extreme dieting are unhelpful for children, especially when they don't factor in the real key drivers of childhood obesity.

There's also the risk that young people can misinterpret the messages around dieting, taking it to extremes such as no fat is good.

The problem — for people of any age — starts with the way these shows are designed.

Extreme weight loss TV programs are entertainment rather than a reflection of real life and as such they concentrate on what will make good TV — personal stories. Thus they focus on the individual — here's Sue sweating on a treadmill, after the ad break watch Sue struggle against her chocolate cravings.

This is damaging in a number of ways.

First, it reinforces to governments that weight is solely a matter of personal



responsibility and it blames the individual for being overweight. This is not helpful, nor is it the approach taken to encourage people to address other risk factors such as quitting smoking.

Second, it isn't based in reality and that's why I call it rehab. The average person doesn't have the money to be woken up at the crack of dawn each day by a personal trainer or to be shadowed by a dietitian to empower them to cut through the fat-free marketing spin on packaging, or a mathematician to help them interpret percentage daily intake guidelines.

Third, the average Victorian passes countless advertisements for junk food and cheap, upsized fast food meals on the way to the train station and has to avoid the row of vending machines in the tea room at

work. We are living in an obesogenic environment where temptation is pushed towards us at every opportunity and it's cheaper to buy a litre of soft drink than bottled water.

So it's no surprise these types of shows are failing to have an impact on our obesity rates in Victoria. In fact, over the years that *The Biggest Loser* has been beamed into our lounge rooms Victorians have become more obese — now 17 per cent of us, according to the latest figures.

To prevent childhood obesity, and ensure a healthy nation into the future, it's time to look beyond the individual and create a supportive environment where the healthy choices are the easy choices.

**Jane Martin is the executive manager of the Obesity Policy Coalition**





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**O**BESITY in Australia is a big problem (pardon the pun) and the first step in fixing any problem is through education. If knowledge were not a vital weapon, we wouldn’t teach people from a young age about the risks associated with smoking, drug use, using coconut oil instead of sunscreen, or wearing double denim. We are constantly bombarded with campaigns about problem gambling or drink driving and, of late, an extremely confronting “educative” campaign about being “fire ready”. Why? Because without adequate knowledge people may not have the power to change their behaviour. Obesity, like any other problem, has to be treated by educating people about the associated risks and showing them how to make changes.

Weight loss television programs do that.

While shows such as *The Biggest Loser* are as much about ratings as they are about weight loss, both contestants and viewers are learning skills needed to fight the fat, so to speak, while they are tuned in.

And it’s a lot cheaper than seeing a dietitian or



hiring a personal trainer.

We are confronted every day with hip-pocket friendly, artery-clogging, heart-at-tack inducing temptations. Even if only 1 per cent of weight-loss program viewers learn to see through the “fat-free” and “low-calorie” jargon plastered across magazines and supermarket shelves, then that’s 1 per cent that is better equipped to make healthier choices.

If a friend or family member had a drinking problem, a drug addiction, anorexia or depression — all of which have severe repercussions for an individual’s health and wellbeing — people would intervene. Obesity is a leading cause of chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, sleep apnoea, osteoarthritis and cancer, not to mention its adverse psychological effects, yet people are scared to do

anything about it. For some reason, we are still worried about the consequences of telling somebody they are too fat, or that they need to do something about their weight problem.

Programs such as *The Biggest Loser* are popular because people can relate to the contestants, to their struggles (on and off the show) and can see that with hard work and determination, it is possible to break the addiction.

Sure, questions could be raised about the weight loss-to-time ratio. The weight that contestants lose is probably not sustainable for most outside that environment, but the underlying message is — even if you have to yo-yo a bit before figuring out what works best for you.

**Tianna Nadalin is a  
Sunday Herald Sun  
editorial assistant.**