

Dieting book for kids outrages health workers

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A book aimed at helping young children lose weight has outraged an eating disorder help group.

Maggie Goes on a Diet, aimed at 6 to 12 year olds, tells the story of an overweight girl who goes on a diet and goes on to become the school soccer star.

Its Hawaiian publishers pitch the book on their website as an inspirational tale for kids.

"Maggie has so much potential that has been hiding under her extra weight," the website says.

Deb Schwarz, manager of Eating Difficulties Education Network (EDEN), a New Zealand not-for-profit organisation, says the book could have the opposite effect, and encourage eating disorders among children.

"Research shows poor body image is associated with depression, bullying, eating disorders, risk taking behaviours, and reduced physical activity. Messages like those in the book promote body dissatisfaction."

She says there are concerns that dieting messages increase disordered eating in children.

According to EDEN, between 2007 and 2010, 29 children under 13 were hospitalised in New Zealand for treatment for disordered eating, a number which does not include those who received support from private clinics and institutions.

And research published in the American Academy of Pediatrics indicated that the rate of eating disorders among children has increased significantly in recent years.

The article cited dieting amongst the reasons for this increase, something which Schwarz says she is not surprised by.

"The dangers of dieting are nothing new. Even in the 90s there was already evidence linking dieting to developing disordered eating, for example in 1999, research found that the girls who dieted were at least five times more likely to develop an eating disorder. Those who dieted severely were 18 times more likely to develop an eating disorder."

The book is being released in New Zealand in October.

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