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Video games get players off couch

From joystick to jumping: More exertion required than fast fingers.

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Philadelphia — The Kuyat children — 11-year-old John and 9-year-old Anna — worked up a sweat the other day at the Upper Main Line YMCA.

The Broomall, Pa., siblings danced, kickboxed, biked and played tennis — an hourlong marathon that bested their dad's 45-minute routine at the Berwyn fitness center.

It wasn't always this way.

“It was a chore to get them to do 15 minutes” at the Y, David Kuyat said. “Now, I'm waiting on them.”

What changed? A couple of months ago, the Y introduced video games.

The once much-maligned staple of couch potatoes has evolved into an exercise siren.

Games such as Dance Dance Revolution and simulated bowling, baseball and kickboxing are enticing children, many of them out of shape, to get off their derrieres and move. Fitness centers and school gym classes are jumping on the DDR mat, the video bike and the virtual tennis court with gusto.

Metro Atlanta health and fitness centers are getting in on the fun, too, offering a variety of virtual reality and simulated experiences for kids, teens and adults. (See accompanying list.)

“By introducing fun activities for kids, we hope to increase the amount of physical activity for children and strengthen their attitudes toward regular physical activity,” said Kristen Obaranec, spokesperson with the YMCA of Metro Atlanta, which offers games at its East Lake, Centennial Place, Kennesaw and Alpharetta family centers.

The concept even has a hip calling card: exer-gaming.

“It's just another vehicle to captivate adolescents,” said Fran Cleland, a professor of kinesiology at West Chester University and president of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education.

Cleland and other experts view the interactive consoles as the latest hook that might draw reluctant adolescents to participate in physical activity for the 60 minutes a day the Centers for Disease Control recommend.

“Children think of exercise negatively,” said Lisa Hansen, codirector of the XRKade Research Lab at the University of South Florida in Tampa. “It's a major issue to get these children moving.”

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The reasons for today's sedentary American youth are varied: neighborhoods without sidewalks, stranger danger, time booked with extracurricular activities, No Child Left Behind, which cuts into school recess and physical education time, and video games.

The Nintendo generation has grown up playing, and socializing, via a screen. Fewer partake in simple, unstructured games. For them, exercise is a chore, not the delightful afternoon of tag or jump rope that occupied their parents and parents' parents.

Not surprisingly, these same children find exer-games immensely enjoyable, Hansen said, based on pilot studies with elementary-school students. The lab was established with funds from iTech Fitness, a company that makes the XRKade brand of interactive fitness equipment.

Limited studies have found that "these exer-games burn calories, do raise heartbeats and offer a physical benefit for kids," according to Hansen. But, she added, it is unclear whether active gaming offers the same benefits as traditional workouts.

Still, fitness facilities with video-game areas have multiplied. Three years ago, only a handful had space dedicated to exer-games. Now, Hansen estimated, at least 80 around the country offer the option — and that does not include schools, community centers or doctors' waiting rooms that might have one or two pieces of equipment.

Few people seem to take issue with children, who already spend dozens of hours a week in front of screens, spending even more time that way.

"Another half-hour or hour doesn't bother me if they're doing something physically active," said Michael Sachs, a Temple University professor of kinesiology.

But, he cautioned, "it's not a panacea."

Ideally, it's a first step toward exploring other activities. Perhaps after doing virtual kickboxing, they might want to try real kickboxing, and so on. "You want more choices," he said. "If this gets kids moving, great. ... That's where you start."

Obesity continues to be a health concern for American children, and lack of activity is a major contributor to the problem.

The most recent National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found that more than 16 percent of 2- to 19-year-olds were obese — a rate that did not change significantly over the study period of 2003 to 2006.

In its first four weeks, the Y's newly renovated Youth and Teen Wellness Center for 10- to 14-year-olds attracted 170 members to its orientation, said Dottie Carotenuto, the youth wellness supervisor.

"It's astonishing," she said. "We have a lot of 9-year-olds waiting for their birthday so they can get in the room."

Carotenuto attributes much of the interest to the video-game consoles. To gain access to the exer-game section at the far end of the center, children have to spend at least 15 to 20 minutes on traditional equipment, such as treadmills and strength-training machines.

"We didn't want them to make a beeline to exer-gaming," she said.

John Kuyat — done with the elliptical trainer and strength circuit — was jumping and tapping to "Every Little Step" by Bobby Brown on the large-screen Dance Dance Revolution game. His sister was his competition.

"Marvelous!" scrolled across the screen when the duo successfully completed the hopscotchlike moves. The game requires stomping on colored arrows on a floor mat while following on a screen visual and musical cues that

turn increasingly complex. Successful moves — which to a bystander look like dancing — earn points.

“It’s great,” John said, praising both the strength circuit and the exer-games, before confiding, “I think the games are more fun.”

GET YOUR GAME ON

Here’s what some local health and fitness centers offer:

- > East Lake and Centennial Place YMCAs offer HOPSports training systems that combine media, technology and physical activity in interactive, multimedia fitness sessions. (A partnership with Falcons Fitness Zones and Atlanta Public Schools).
- > Northwest Family YMCA in Kennesaw features XRKade, Wii-type activities magnified onto a flat panel TV. Works off an adapted PlayStation 2, with 13 components including bikes, skateboard, DDR, boxing, kicking, a running mat, and more. For ages 10 and up.
- > Ed Isakson/Alpharetta Family YMCA offers Dance Dance Revolution as part of XRKade in its teen center.
- > Concourse Athletic Club in Sandy Springs features a Wii system in its Kid’s Club (up to 9 years old), and the new Smart Cycle for toddlers.
- > Crunch does not allow children but lets the adults play on Espresso Bikes which use interactive gaming software to create the effect of an outdoor bike ride inside on a stationary bike.

— Vikki Conwell

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