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Video Games That Keep Kids Fit

By Carolyn Sayre

Gym teachers and video games have never been a happy mix. While one side struggles to pull kids off the couch, the other holds them fast. But Kim Mason, a phys-ed director in Rogers, Ark., with 28 years of experience selling kids on the virtues of sweat, did something unlikely last year: she persuaded her public-school district to invest \$35,000 in brand-new video-game equipment.

That would be more surprising if students in Rogers were the only ones plugging into interactive workouts, but they're not. Some 2,000 schools in at least 35 states have begun to set up exergaming fitness centers with motion sensors and touch-sensitive floor mats to allow kids to control the action onscreen not just with their thumbs but also with their bodies. Do enough dancing or kung-fu kicks, and you just might get the same level of exercise as from chasing a soccer ball. What's more, this is a workout kids don't try to duck. "Physical education used to be a joke," says Dr. John Ratey, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of *Spark*, an upcoming book about exercise. "That has changed simply because we are catching up with the gamer generation."

Finding a way to help this most sedentary age group is more important than ever. Nearly 17% of U.S. kids are considered overweight or obese, and many more are struggling. Meanwhile, as scale numbers are climbing, school budgets for P.E. are falling. As a result, fewer than 10% of elementary schools meet the National Association for Sport and Physical Education's standard of students spending 150 minutes a week in gym class.

The high-tech answer to the problem came two years ago when West Virginia University studied the health effect of an exergaming system called Dance Dance Revolution (DDR)--interactive games that instruct kids to use their feet to tap buttons on a sensor mat. After a pilot program found the games were beneficial, the state vowed to install consoles in all its public schools by next year. (It didn't hurt the study's credibility that it was funded in part by an insurance company, not by the gamemaker.) Since then, other districts have climbed aboard, helped by video-game makers like Nintendo and Sony, which are designing systems to meet the demand; small companies like Espresso Fitness that donate equipment; and federal grants and private donations that bankroll the purchase of equipment. "The old system is failing kids," says Phil Lawler, director of training and outreach at PE4life, a nonprofit based in Kansas City, Mo., that helps modernize P.E. "We are tricking them into exercising."

A gaming system, which can cost up to \$4,000 a pop, is more expensive than, say, a kickball, but the fact is, it may work just as well. In January the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., found that obese kids burned six times as many calories playing DDR as they did with a traditional video game. And in July the wonderfully named Alasdair Thin, a researcher of human physiology at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, Scotland, found that college students

burned twice as many calories playing an active video game in which they dodged and kicked for 30 minutes as they did walking on a treadmill. Studies have not yet shown how the new games measure up against a real session of, say, soccer or wind sprints.

Of course, since a child told to hustle around a track pretty much has to do it, critics argue that there's no need for video games in gym classes even if they do have some health benefits. But there's a physical difference between an hour of exercise enthusiastically pursued and one that's merely plodded through. And, Lawler says, "most kids aren't volunteering to do pull-ups after school." Develop a taste for aerobic video games, however, and you just might carry the habit home.

But can anything hold the fruit-fly attention span of kids? "Video games are not the answer," says Warren Gendel, founder of Fitwize 4 Kids, a chain of traditional children's gyms. "Kids will get bored and be back on the couch." Maybe, but that won't stop the games from coming. Fisher-Price just began selling a video-game bike for toddlers. No word yet on a version for the prewalking crowd--but don't bet against it.

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