

Fitness Revolution in Motion

New Video Games For Children Provide Workouts in Disguise

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As they try to get children off their couches and onto their feet, schools and gyms in the Washington region and across the country are harnessing some of the same technology often blamed for making kids fat: video games.

The Alexandria YMCA is one of the first in this area to pilot an "I-gym" — a workout room filled with about a dozen pieces of equipment that marry video games and fitness. Think of it as Nintendo's Wii on steroids. Across the river in Silver Spring, Woodlin Elementary School has tried out a NEOS, a giant orange play structure with flashing lights, colors and "whoop whoop" sounds.

"Kids are going to exercise if they want to and have fun doing it," said Janice Williams, senior vice president for special projects at the YMCA of Metropolitan Washington. "So many kids are tech savvy, and video games are a draw to them, so why not have them use a video game that requires them to use movement?"

The effort does not come inexpensively. But here and at schools and in communities elsewhere, the investment reflects growing anxiety about the health and fitness of a generation of children who are heavier and could suffer more health problems than their parents and grandparents. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 9 million — or 16 percent — of young people between the ages of 6 and 19 are overweight by the agency's standards, triple the number in 1980.

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But efforts to combat the problem over the past decade have made little progress in reducing waistlines. In the Washington region alone, one in four children is considered overweight, the CDC reports.

That's why YMCA officials have decided to go digital.

The equipment in Alexandria allows students to "snowboard" without the chill and

"drive" all-terrain vehicles without the mud. The students might not realize it, but all that pedaling, balancing and hopping is boosting their heart rates and making them sweat, said Inez Edwards, association director of youth wellness for the YMCA of Metropolitan Washington.

Incorporating electronics into exercise equipment is not completely new. Many gyms and schools have adopted versions of Dance Dance Revolution, an electronic game that challenges players to follow dance steps displayed on a video screen into their fitness programs. Nintendo's Wii, a video game system that encourages movement, has been a hit in schools and senior centers.

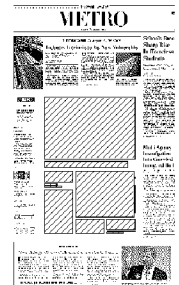
But the equipment at the Alexandria YMCA is even more sophisticated. Edwards pointed to two kids "snowboarding" down the side of the mountain. They weren't just having fun: They were working their core muscles as they attempted to balance while steering, she said.

"You're getting so engaged, you don't want to stop," said Mike Hansen, chief executive officer of iTech Fitness, which manufactures the equipment being used at the YMCA. "Kids don't give you that much time. They want instant gratification, which is what these machines do."

Hansen said the equipment is popular with gyms and YMCAs. Some hospital groups have also expressed interest in the machines. Sales have also grown internationally: Hansen said his company has a deal with a chain of fitness clubs in South Korea.

Because the machines have started to pop up in gyms and local schools only recently, there is little independent analysis of whether this equipment is more effective at holding young people's attention longer, whether it provides more fitness benefits than traditional equipment and whether the outcome is worth the significant investment required to build a digital playground.

But watching students bounce from machine to machine, it's hard to believe they're not burning calories.



On a recent day, more than a dozen children were playing in the gym at the Alexandria YMCA. The noise level in the room was deafening — think the arcade at your local Chuck E. Cheese. But the kids were too busy scurrying from machine to machine, showing off their pedaling and dance prowess to a visitor to give it much thought. One boy darted from side to side blocking soccer kicks from a virtual opponent on the screen in front of him. On another side of the room, two preteen girls grooved to the tune “Funkytown,” executing a complicated series of hops, stretches and jumps. In another corner, two second-graders were pedaling wildly while steering their virtual motorcycles around a racetrack.

“It’s better because with regular video games, you don’t move at all,” Jasmine Steele, 11, said in between sessions on the dance machine. “I have an Xbox and a Wii at home, but it’s not as good.”

Sarah Sirgo, principal at Woodlin Elementary, discovered the electronic behemoth NEOS — sort of a “Simon Says” meets “Whac-a-Mole” — when she was shopping for new playground equipment last year.

A Maryland company lent her the machine, which was an instant hit, particularly among girls and those with special needs, who traditionally shy away from anything remotely physical.

“This is a tech generation, and here was something that everyone could enjoy,” Sirgo said.

Indeed, during one NEOS session, even the smallest child seemed to relish chasing the colored lights and whacking them at the appropriate time.

“They get a workout without knowing they’re getting a workout,” said Jeff Barber, president of Playground Specialists Inc., an Emmitsburg-based company that lent the equipment to Woodlin.

But there is an issue: cost.

When Sirgo looked into buying a NEOS unit for her playground, she was told it would run about \$30,000, about what it would cost to outfit an entire playground with traditional equipment, she said. Barber said that despite the cost, some groups have expressed interest in purchasing the machines, including a recreation center, a park and a couple of schools. YMCA officials estimated it cost \$200,000 to outfit what they have dubbed their “Y-Zone,” and more pieces of equipment will be added soon.

The YMCA’s Edwards said the investment is significant, but she and others expect that the equipment will attract not just kids, but also senior citizens who might like the interactive cycling machines or be willing to try the dance machine.

“It’s about options,” she said. “We’re excited about this new way of getting kids active. It’s an alternative to being the one person who doesn’t get picked because he’s too fat. That person can do” Y-Zone.

The Alexandria YMCA plans to have its full electronic playground completed in mid-March, but given the cost, Sirgo will have to wait a bit longer to launch hers.

For now, she said, she’ll continue to encourage her students to run, jump and skip and hope that maybe, just maybe, a benefactor with deep pockets and an affinity for high technology will enable her to usher her school’s fitness program into the 21st century.



PHOTOS BY TRACY A. WOODWARD — THE WASHINGTON POST

At the **Alexandria YMCA**, youngsters get in the rhythm of the **Dance Dance Revolution** video game.



Marrae Pierce, left, and **Christian Little**, both 7, play an “**extreme snowboard**” video game, which gives their core muscles a workout as they balance while steering.



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Demetrius Stoner-Williams of the Alexandria YMCA helps Mahalia Giesselmann, 8, with a wireless belt for the Trazer Soccer Goalie game.