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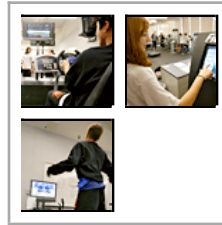
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San Francisco Chronicle

High-tech play enlisted to fight teen obesity

Ilene Lechuk, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Gabby Barela's ponytail swung wildly, and her bangs fell over her eyes as she hopped, shuffled and tapped to "Wonderful Night" by Fatboy Slim. The Redwood City 15-year-old's gaze was locked on a video screen telling her where to put her feet on the Dance Dance Revolution floor pad.



This is suburban Woodside High School's new gym class.

Dance Dance Revolution and other "exergames" -- stationary video game bikes, snowboards, virtual soccer -- are appearing in P.E. classes and in private gyms for kids that are opening in the Bay Area and across the country.

Fans of exergaming hope it will activate a sedentary, video-game-loving generation at a time when an estimated 30 percent of American children ages 6 to 19 are considered overweight.

"The kids love (Dance Dance Revolution) and the game bikes. This is the first time in 11 years of teaching P.E. that I've had to kick kids out of class who don't want to stop exercising," said Laura Perdikomatis, physical education department chair at Woodside High.

But scientists are questioning whether high-tech play will cut the fat or be a passing fad for an overweight generation.

"In the last four or five years, there's been a movement in the fitness industry to use technology to get kids off the couch. The concern is we don't have any research one way or the other that it is helpful," said Stephen Sanders, director of physical education at the University of South Florida.

Sanders and other pediatric obesity experts at the Mayo Clinic and at UCSF are observing children on exergaming equipment, monitoring their heart rates and weight and asking them to keep diaries.

The potential downside is that kids, being kids, may get bored and quit -- or get so engrossed in a game that they won't work hard enough. And it may be that the games just don't work as fitness tools.

Woodside High School took the gamble and installed about 10 stations in its new fitness center in September.

Gabby, taking a break from dancing, said she feels the workout in her thighs and calves after class.

Her classmate Jose Pereda, 16, sat with other boys on stationary bikes, all staring at screens showing them in race cars or all-terrain vehicles. The faster they pedaled, the faster their onscreen vehicles moved -- except those of the boys who had figured out how to manipulate the game without pedaling.

Jose said he knows he's getting a workout: His legs feel wobbly when he gets off.

In Delano (Kern County), at Cecil Avenue Middle School, where P.E. teacher Ken Dyar organized a jogathon fundraiser to buy game bikes and dance pads two years ago, students wear heart rate monitors that show most of them spend the entire time in or above their target zone.

"They don't realize they are exercising. The sweat is pouring down their face," said Dyar, who was named a California teacher of the year in 2006 for his innovations in physical education.

He was motivated by this statistic: Delano was the ninth-fattest city in the state in 2004, he said. At his

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school that year, a state fitness exam found only 27 percent of seventh-graders were fit following tests of their aerobic capacity, body fat composition, strength and flexibility. The state average was 29 percent.

Dyar said it's too soon to tell whether the games are improving Delano students' fitness scores, which have risen, fallen and risen again in the past few years.

Courtney Cook, a fifth-grade teacher at Cesar Chavez Elementary in San Francisco, has been a huge fan of the games since a Dance Revolution set was donated to her classroom last year for rainy days.

"It's excellent for their coordination, and it's an incredible cardio workout," Cook said. "It's gotten to the point that if it's sunny out they get disappointed."

Nationally, the widest distribution of exergames at schools is in West Virginia, where Dance Dance Revolution -- which started as an arcade game in Japan during the late 1990s -- is being installed in all 765 public schools.

Also banking on exergames are many owners of for-profit youth gyms -- where parents and coaches drop off 9- to 18-year-olds who work out with kid-size weights, resistance machines, rock-climbing walls and exergames, and can talk to trainers and nutritionists.

Dan and Stacey Jones opened RClub Interactive Fitness in Pleasanton last spring with nine types of video exercise games, including Jackie Chan Studio Fitness, which directs players to run down a virtual street and step on ninjas. Those games take up half the gym floor; traditional cardio machines and weights occupy the rest.

"We don't see this as a fad anymore," said Michael Hansen, chief operating officer of iTech Fitness, a Colorado firm that makes a slew of interactive exercise games.

Hansen predicted that the number of gyms for young people will double this year across the country. When iTech pitched its equipment to two dozen independent health clubs last February, only three showed interest, he said, but by October, 20 clubs were considering installing the company's games.

But Dan Jones at RClub said its membership is at 100 and not growing as quickly as he had expected. He said he didn't count on having to compete with the traditional youth sports teams.

Other kid gym owners are reluctant to invest in exergaming without proof that it affects youth health.

"I'm totally against them," said Warren Gendel, founder of Fitwize 4 Kids, a chain that started in Novato in 2004 and spread to 40 locations in 16 states. "For me, the whole goal is to get the kids away from the screens and make them aware how exciting exercise can be."

Fitwize offers video games only as a reward for good work on the traditional cardio and weight equipment. After members complete a 45-minute circuit, they can spend 10 minutes on Dance Dance Revolution. The clubs also have interactive video game bikes where two kids can race each other. But Gendel complained that some kids have figured how to manipulate their onscreen character with the hand-held controller -- and no pedaling.

Fitwize co-founder Turker Sus also worries that youths don't use their full strength on the games and limit their flexibility by staying at the same station for extended periods.

The research so far is inconclusive.

Children burn more calories playing active video games than they do playing traditional video games while sitting, or when watching television while walking very slowly -- 1.5 miles per hour -- on a treadmill, researchers at the Mayo Clinic reported in December. The researchers had tracked 25 kids ages 8 to 12 while they played Dance Dance Revolution and Nicktoons Movin', which places players virtually inside the game to compete with cartoon characters.

Looking more deeply, researchers at the University of South Florida College of Education opened an interactive fitness lab in late January for children ages 8 to 18 and are tracking whether the equipment motivates the kids and beneficially raises heart rates.

The lab offers Dance Dance Revolution, game bikes and a snowboard game; 3-Kick, where players kick or hit foam pads as fast as possible; and Cybex Trazer, which tracks and mimics the movements of users who wear an infrared belt.

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Researchers at UCSF are seeing discouraging results so far in tracking how video exercise games affect severely obese kids -- who made up 16 percent of children and teens in 2000, double the proportion in 1976, according to the American Obesity Association.

"The bottom line is if they do it, it works. But the problem is they don't do it," Dr. Robert Lustig, a pediatric endocrinologist and nationally renowned obesity expert, said about their findings, yet to be published.

Pediatrics Professor Kristine Madsen and Lustig enlisted 30 youths ages 9 to 18 from UCSF's pediatric obesity clinic to take Dance Dance Revolution home and keep a diary for six months. Within four weeks, the children reported being bored with the game. By the end of six months, almost no one was dancing regularly.

"The only thing that works is mandatory exercise," along with a change in diet, Lustig said.

Lustig says the obesity epidemic is caused by a food supply "poisoned" by fructose, which is altering people's biochemistry and driving them to eat more and move less.

Until there is more data, P.E. teachers and gym owners must go on what they see and hear from users.

They'll look to teens like Anthony Rogers of San Jose, a 17-year-old who weighs almost 300 pounds and recently joined the Overtime Fitness teen gym in Mountain View because he likes its handful of video games.

Anthony said he tried to lose weight at traditional gyms but always got bored and quit. At Overtime, he said, he rides bikes with televisions attached and spends long sessions playing Mo Boxing, a video game where he puts his hands in heavy red gloves and aims at an animated boxer on a screen.

One recent day after school, Anthony jabbed, weaved and bobbed, and sweat trickled down his face.

"It's entertaining," Anthony said. "They make you feel like you are not working out. But you are."

E-mail Ilene Lelchuk at ilelchuk@sfgate.com.

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