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## Playtime at the Health Club



Monica Almeida/The New York Times

By [MIREYA NAVARRO](#)

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LOS ANGELES

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J. Emilio Flores For The New York Times

Craig Horowitz, 14, with a trainer, Taylor Kevin Isaacs, is among a growing number children using

AT 13, Jena Jerve has managed to stretch her days to do it all: keep a 4.0 grade-point average, play center on her school's basketball team and nourish her love for dancing with six hours a week of tap, ballet and jazz.

But over the last year and a half Jena has also been cramming a less typical extra-curricular activity into her busy schedule, the health club. There, for about an hour twice a week, she has discovered the rigors of weight training and the joy of building stamina on a stationary bike and fitting into jeans. "I've lost inches around my stomach and waist and legs," said Jenna, who is 5-foot-9 and weighs about 175 pounds. "I have a lot of energy now."

With health statistics pointing at an increasingly obese population, the national preoccupation with weight is leading the parents of teenagers and even younger children to sign them up at gyms tailored to them, hire personal trainers and schedule workouts as they do piano lessons.

For the Xbox and iPod generations, unstructured play in the fresh air has become more and more a thing of the past, parents and fitness experts say. Hide and seek? Riding a bike to school? Many children now pedal only indoors in front of

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growing number of children using health clubs. a racing game on a video screen.

Although there are critics who dismiss the trend as unnecessary, or as an overindulgence of the affluent, many parents say they have reason to buy - sometimes at adult-like prices - health-club memberships for their children.

"When we were kids, my friends and I disappeared for the day" to play, said Rhonda Horowitz, a real estate appraiser in Northridge, Calif., who has hired a personal trainer to work with her 14-year-old son, Craig, whose weight hovers around 200. "In this day and age you can't do that. You make play dates."

The fitness industry has been tapping into the children's market in earnest over the last couple of years. Fitwize 4 Kids, a gym for children 6 to 15 where workouts are rewarded with apples and bananas and include play like jumping rope, spun off 14 franchises last year nationwide. It charges \$50 to \$125 a month, and plans to open dozens more.

The International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association says children are the second-fastest-growing market for health clubs after baby boomers over 55. Nearly one third of its 5,000 member clubs offer a children's component, the association said, and more than 4.6 million American children between 6 and 17 hold memberships with health clubs, compared with 3.2 million in 2000.

Increased attention to what is often called an [epidemic](#) of overweight children - 16 percent, or more than nine million children and adolescents, ages 6 to 19, are overweight - means the pressure is on for the junior set to join the battle of the bulge, most often at the prodding of Mom or Dad. Some parents note there has been a cultural change in aesthetics over time so that yesterday's desirable cute cherubs, they say, have become today's fatties.

"I'm 50, and when I was growing up, all of us were considered normal, even if the kid was husky," said Helen Cordes, editor of *Daughters*, a national magazine for parents of girls. "By today's standards we'd all have to go on a [diet](#)."

Many families are now walking a fine line between real and unnecessary worry. Jena's mother, Mary Baldwin, 46, said that despite all the exercise from dance and basketball, her daughter put on extra weight because of a combination of genetic makeup and meals on the fly. "I can't pretend we don't eat our share of fast food because of scheduling," said Ms. Baldwin, a nanny in Novato, in the San Francisco Bay Area.

When Ms. Baldwin first suggested that her daughter join a gym a few years ago, Jena was not interested.

"The last thing you want is to send her into [bulimia](#)," Ms. Baldwin said.

But as Jena got older she became more self-conscious and by fourth grade was facing teasing in school about her weight, Ms. Baldwin said. A year and a half ago, by the end of fifth grade, Jena agreed to start her workouts at a Fitwize 4 Kids gym. "I'm not looking for the new Miss USA," Ms. Baldwin said. "For us it's about maintaining health."

Officials with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who have raised the alarm about childhood [obesity](#), say health is the main reason for concern, not appearance. Although teasing or social shunning may be what overweight children first notice, they are also susceptible to adult diseases like Type 2 [diabetes](#) and, some studies suggest, may face shorter life spans than their parents because of the onset of illness at younger ages.

The fitness industry has responded not only with new health club chains, but with high-tech exercise equipment modified for children, with workout DVD's and children's programs in adult gyms for those who want to lose weight and those who want to enhance sports performance. Training with weights is safe, those in the industry say, as long as it is supervised by a professional.

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