



STEPHEN M. KATZ PHOTOS/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Cassie Howard, 8, and Terence Joyner, 8, both of Virginia Beach, compete on Cateye Game Bikes at the Interactive Zone at the Mount Trashmore YMCA in Virginia Beach.

# FIGHT FAT WITH FUN

## Aiming to make fitness a game children enjoy

BY LORRAINE EATON  
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

OVER AT THE MOUNT TRASHMORE Y, kids have got to pay to play. Pedal hard. And push. And flex.

Up for some Xbox? Wiggling your thumbs while sitting on your butt won't cut it here. Plant your tennis shoes on the metal platform, grab the waist-high controls and push in the direction you want your guy to go.

Want to play a downhill-skiing video game on that 42-inch-screen TV? Have a seat on the Gamebike and start pedaling. The faster you pedal, the faster your skier flies down the slope.

"It makes you work hard," said Kevin Jackson, 7, who on a recent afternoon pedaled furiously, determined to beat his opponent on the bike next to him. His "man" on the screen, Psymon, careened down the slopes at 50 mph, soaring during jumps and occasionally smashing into evergreens and boundary fences.

The games are part of a sprint by local gyms and entrepreneurs – as well as national exercise equipment and video companies – to respond to America's childhood-obesity crisis with, well, fun. And in the past few months the local pace has picked up.

The YMCA of South Hampton Roads late last year opened Interactive Zones, exercise areas for children ages 5 and up, in all 12 of its Family Centers. My Gym, a franchise that focuses on children 3 months



Stephon Brooksire, 12, of Virginia Beach, left, and Sven Patzer, 6, of Norfolk go head-to-head on the Kilowatt machine at the Interactive Zone at the Mount Trashmore Y.

### The American Heart Association recommends

■ All children age 2 and older should participate in at least 30 minutes of enjoyable, moderate-intensity activities every day. They should also perform at least 30 minutes of vigorous physical activities at least three to four days each week to achieve and maintain a good level of cardiorespiratory (heart and lung) fitness.

■ If children don't have a full 30-minute activity break each day, try to provide at least two 15-minute periods or three 10-minute periods in which they can engage in vigorous activities appropriate to their age, sex and stage of physical and emotional development.

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# Fitness: Gyms aim to make physical activities fun

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to 13 years old, opened a second Virginia Beach location in January. In Portsmouth, a girls-only facility that opened in October offers a workout video featuring club members. And at the Beach, a mother and former school teacher offers yoga classes for children as young as 3.

"We wanted to address the youth-obesity crisis, and we realized we had nothing to wow them," said Karen Gambill, family program director for the Mount Trashmore YMCA. "This gets them away from the couch and TV."

The YMCAs' Interactive Zones for children ages 5 and up (5 to 7 with a parent) feature virtual reality games that run on kid power. In addition, downsized strength-training machines are in place at the Norfolk and Mount Trashmore centers for children 8 and older.

According to Donae Jarvis, 11, who is in the Mount Trashmore YMCA's after-school program, the Interactive Zone scores with nothing but net.

"It's not just boring," she said, a bit out of breath. "We used to play board games, just move our hands. Now we come ready to run."

Donae had been working up a sweat slamming orange balls into the Sportwall Station with her teammate, Cassie Howard, 8. To beat the guys, they had to hit blinking lights on their side of a tall, black backdrop. The scoreboard in between told them who was in charge.

Final score: 18-4. Girls rule!

Over at My Gym in the Beach's Hilltop area, children climbed padded shapes, jumped on mini-trampolines, crawled through mazes and disappeared into a ball pit.

The facility offers supervised structured and unstructured play time for children as young as 3 months. The Cardio Kids class, for example, is an ever-changing combination of obstacle courses, push-ups, kick boxing, gymnastics and yoga for ages 8 to 13. The Tiny Tykes class for 3- to 11-month-olds features

songs, dances and tumbling.

Co-owner Brian Mayer calls it "an introduction to working out, but the kids don't even realize that there's a purpose to it."

Mayer and his partner, Lonnie Horsey, worked for the city of Virginia Beach at the Great Neck Recreation Center running programs for youths and adults before they opened My Gym in February 2004. Mayer has a master's degree in early childhood education, Horsey a master's in sports management.

Out on the mats, 22-month-old Zoe Dukas was climbing in and out of a padded octagon. Her mother, Sarah Dukas, watched, but the toddler had the operation well under control.

They come twice a week, and Mom is sold on the concept of a gym just for children, where she says Zoe practices physical skills such as balance and coordination and gets in some socialization.

"You want your kids to be excited about being active," she said. "Zoe knows the exit we take to come here, and if we don't come here, it's a problem."

Mayer estimates that 300 children per week come to the facility. The popularity led to this year's opening of a second My Gym in the Red Mill section of Virginia Beach.

In Portsmouth, girls 7 through their early teens get a workout in the Healthy Girls "clubhouse," which opened in October in Churchland with a mission of developing lifelong fitness and nutrition habits. Exercise offerings include yoga, aerobics, step classes and strength training, and girls can bring the workout home with the "kit," an exercise ball, pump and video featuring club members.

Response has been "amazing," said co-owner Kathy Young. A crush of calls from Virginia Beach residents has prompted them to plan a Beach location, which they hope to open in the fall.

Jennifer Sedorowicz is working to get her kids' fitness idea off and running. The former Beach elementary school teacher taught her stu-



STEPHEN M. KATZ/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Darius Samuel, 11, and Cassie Howard, 8, both of Virginia Beach, take each other on at the Sportwall at the Interactive Zone in the YMCA near Mount Trashmore in Virginia Beach.

## PLACES FOR CHILDREN

### YMCA of South Hampton Roads

Interactive Zones are in place at all 12 Family Centers: Norfolk, Suffolk, Effingham Street in Portsmouth, Mount Trashmore, Hilltop, Indian River, Great Bridge/Hickory, Greenbrier, Greenbrier North, Albemarle, the Outer Banks and the Eastern Shore.

Call (757) 962-5555 for the branch nearest you, or go to [www.ymcasrh.org](http://www.ymcasrh.org)

### My Gym Red Mill

2181 Upton Drive, Suite 426  
Virginia Beach  
(757) 430-0111

### My Gym Hilltop

1554 Laskin Road,  
Suites 118 & 120  
Virginia Beach  
(757) 425-7600,  
[www.my-gym.com](http://www.my-gym.com)

### Healthy Girls

5936 Village St.  
Portsmouth  
(757) 638-GIRL  
[www.healthygirls.net](http://www.healthygirls.net)

### Yoga classes for kids

Call Jennifer Sedorowicz,  
(757) 472-9009

dents yoga techniques to help them calm down and to deal with stress.

"They loved it, even the boys. I think it even helped them with their SOLs."

She earned certification through YogaKids International to teach children ages 3 months to teens and wants

to start classes soon, although initial response has been slow.

"Some people think yoga is a religion," Sedorowicz said. "Yoga is more than fitness. It's understanding your mind-body connection, getting yourself in sync."

"I'm hoping that it will pick up soon."

So parents love them, and children love them – but are these gyms better than going outside to play? And are weight machines good for growing bodies?

Mary Graham, a family practitioner, has seen plenty of children who do not get the 30 minutes of moderate exercise a day recommended by the American Heart Association.

"Children today do not have the same opportunities for physical exercise that used to be a normal part of our day in American life," said Graham, who is also a parent and the on-site physician for Chesapeake Health's Cardiac Rehabilitation Program. "There are so many safety concerns. You can't just say, 'Come back when it's dark.'"

Even for toddlers, facilities that provide interesting, developmentally appropriate activities in a safe and supervised environment can be good alternatives, she said. Programs should stress varied elements of fitness – strength, flexibility and endurance.

Strength training used to be taboo for children, but the American Academy of

Pediatrics and the American College of Sports Medicine now support it. That's strength training, not weight lifting power lifting or bodybuilding. And that's in a structured, supervised program after orientation.

Strength training, according to the academy, is a "systematic program of exercises designed to increase individual's ability to exert resist force." Rubber tubing can be used in strength training; so can weight machines designed for children.

Hoist Fitness Systems, the brand of weight machines used in the local YMCAs, are designed so the growth plates – cartilage that has not yet turned to bone – are not stressed.

"Then we had to figure out how to make it fun," said Bruce Kaplan, national sales manager. "How do you do that? Every machine is a risk."

The shoulder press at the racks back, for example.

No matter how good the gym, Graham said, parents should be aware of warning signs that exercise has turned into something else: if a child gets extremely upset over missing a session, if children insist on going to the gym even when ill.

"It pains me to say this, but we've created a culture where young people get bombarded with images of people that are, let me say genetically unusual." Working out to achieve that type of body, Graham added, is not healthy.

Donae was a gym regular during spring break, and when she returned to school her friends asked, "Have you gotten taller?"

She says her body has changed, but she mentions only as an aside. She loves movement, she says, crave it even.

"I can't wait to work out and get that feeling again."

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