Trouble prying your teen away from the joystick for a little exercise? Make workouts a virtual reality.

For teens weaned on virtual play, the notion of swinging a bat or dribbling a basketball in the real world may not be a slam-dunk.

"This generation is the gamer generation," says Steve Sanders, Ed.D., director of the School of Physical Education and Exercise Science at the University of South Florida (USF). And they're more sedentary than ever.

Obesity levels are rising, and many parents worry that their kids are spending too much time gaming and not enough exercising. But the good news is that they may not have to choose between the two because the latest generation of interactive video games is designed to get kids moving.

With video exergames, there's no more slouching on the couch, joystick in hand. Instead, these games turn the players themselves into the joysticks, says Cedric Bryant, Ph.D., chief science officer for the American Council on Exercise. "Interactive video games make you move in order to play the game on the screen," Bryant explains.

Getting Their Game On
Consider Nintendo's Wii, a leader in exergaming. Motion-sensing technology lets the Wii's remote control function as anything from a tennis racket to a bowling ball. Gamers swing the remote to hit a tennis ball, for example, and their virtual on-screen counterpart mimics the motion. In another virtual twist, Wii's Fit line includes a balance board with programs for yoga, soccer, aerobics and other core workout exercises.

Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3 also use wireless controllers as an extension of the player's body for games such as Go! Sports Ski, a skiing simulator. Rock Band lets kids jam as a group. The virtual game includes peripherals—lead guitar, bass guitar, drum and microphone—so teens can rock the rafters as they boogie.

Then there's Dance Dance Revolution, a game that has truly spawned a revolution in physically active gaming. Originally an arcade game from Japan, it's now widely available on several game systems for home use. Players stand on a special pad with arrow panels and dance to a rhythm determined by the song that's playing. With practice, they can advance to higher levels of coordination and intensity.
Virtual Workouts, Real Sweat
Researchers are now studying the role of exergames in promoting physical fitness, and so far results are positive. A study in *Pediatrics* (December 2006) found that children expend twice as much energy playing exergames as they do playing traditional video games. And a small study in the *International Journal of Sports Medicine* (October 2006) showed that preteens and teens, whether overweight or not, were able to raise their heart rate to the level needed for developing cardio fitness while using *Dance Dance Revolution*. However, the researchers note that additional study is needed to determine whether video games such as this one might also help players lose some weight.

At USF, Sanders is codirector of an interactive fitness project called the XRKade Research Lab. "We're just getting started and don't have a lot of results yet, but we are finding out that kids who try to bow out of traditional gym class activities are not having any problems wanting to participate in the lab," Sanders says. "The technology is so exciting that they forget they're being physically active while playing the games."

That's just what happened with Kayneeia Weaver, a 14-year-old from Tampa, Florida, who participated at XRKade. Kayneeia's father, Stanley, had heard about the program and was skeptical at first. "I'm not into video games, but we started going together," he says. "Once we got going on these games, we loved it. Kayneeia's energy level is so much higher. After a couple of hours sweating it out racing each other with skis and dancing, her stamina is better too."

From Gamers to Athletes
Sanders cautions that exergames are not a replacement for real-world sports. "Video games should be a complement to physical exercise. In exergaming, you can hone balance and do aerobics, but it's more difficult to develop skills like swinging a tennis racket or throwing a ball," he explains. "We're hoping that exergames turn kids on to physical activity, and they realize how beneficial it is to their health. When they turn off the game, they will still want to play."

Hal Halpin, president of the Entertainment Consumers Association, says concerned parents often ask him about setting limits. "I tell them to watch the total amount of screen time. During the school year, games should come after school and extracurricular activities, even if it is exercise," he says. When choosing game titles, he advises getting involved in the process. "Use a rental service like GameFly [gamefly.com] to try out games before buying them. Watch your kids play so you know what they're up to."

Even better, jump in and play the games right along with your kids, Bryant suggests. "Children of active adults tend to be more active themselves. Hold a friendly family competition and get engaged. I have four sons, and they love nothing better than to see Dad show a lack of rhythm in *Dance Dance Revolution*."

Video games are here to stay, and as a parent you can make the best of it. "Kids are going to listen to music, and it would be great if they'd listen to classical, but they don't," Halpin says. "Same with games. It would be great to see every kid outside running, but they aren't." Interactive video games are a great way to get teens moving and spark their interest in life beyond the couch.