

# Jewish Community Center gets kids into a new zone of play

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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH  
06/09/2008

With its new jGame Zone, the Jewish Community Center in Chesterfield is working to battle child obesity by turning kids into human joy sticks. As part of the center's \$4 million renovation, the new-fangled video arcade has kids jumping, pedaling and moving their bodies into a zone that many aren't familiar with.

While giving a tour of the jGame Zone, Monica Siebert, the center's program director, says, "It's innovative new technology like this that's working for us rather than against us, like old video games did."

The room is like a beehive one morning, buzzing with about 20 or so kids. In one corner, a half dozen of them teeter on rubber inflated discs, as they wait to play the video games that line the room's perimeter. "OK, we're going to do 15 bicep curls, while balancing," Siebert says. She bends over to the kids' eye-level and pumps her arms up and down, counting to 15. The children, ages 4 to 6, mimic her. Siebert notes how these simple exercises improve balance and core strength while warming up muscles.

The rest of the games, however, go a step farther. They take kids into a world of virtual reality that, fitness experts say, challenges the kids' reaction times and acceleration, speed and power, balance and spatial awareness.

## 'THIS IS THE COOLEST THING'

In addition to the jGame Zone, the Chesterfield center also added two XerTrainers, interactive fitness and sports training target walls, near the basketball courts and indoor batting cage. Several camp counselors and a staff member take time from shooting hoops to demonstrate ways to play with it.

"This is the coolest thing in the world," says Chris Hoevel, 18, running toward the 8-foot tall walls like a first-grader on a sugar rush. He flips a switch, then he and the others — all young men — get in line and take turns hurling rubber balls toward lit circles on one of the boards as fast as they could. If they hit the circle, the light goes out and points would accumulate on a scoreboard. They cheer one another on.

Sometimes, Siebert says, she has little kids hit the circles with foam noodles. Other times, she'll have them weave through an obstacle course before turning the lit circles off. Todd Stein, 26, the center's batting cage manager, says the XerTrainer and jGame Zone are great practice tools for kids in the center's nine-week sport camps.

The XerTrainer is great for practicing pitching, throwing and fielding, he said. Soccer players can kick soccer balls at the targets and football players can hurl footballs.

Back in the jGame Zone, Kate Nelson, 6, and Reilly Regna, 7, were glistening with sweat as they bop to the beat and virtual dance steps of Dance-Dance Revolution, a virtual oldie but goody in the realm of virtual reality. Kate walks her dog quite a bit but thinks Dance-Dance Revolution is even better exercise. And Reilly says she prefers it over some of the other games in the room because the songs are catchy "and because it gets easier all the time."

## SETTING GOALS

The jGame Zone is staffed from 4 to 8 p.m. Monday through Thursday during the summer and whenever summer camps are in session. It also has "qualifying time" on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when kids can meet specific goals.

"They can practice at any time, but that's the only time they can come in and get it recorded and compete against themselves and others," Siebert says. "It encourages them to keep on working out and

getting better." It also offers kids who don't play sports a chance to work at developing hand-eye coordination, she says.

### **FAMILY MATTERS**

Margaret Schatz, director of sales and marketing, says the center's board of directors and renovation planning committee thought hard about how to accommodate entire families, regardless of age. It already had an early childhood center and plenty of equipment and classes for adults.

"In order not to have a gap in service, we thought: 'What can we do for those members between ages 6 and 15?'" Schatz says. Membership fees at JCC are \$70 a month for families and \$53 a month for individuals. The new Jewish Community Center slated to open next year near Creve Coeur will also have a jGame Zone. For years, the location there had the Star Center, which contained low-tech amenities such as basketball hoops and obstacle courses. Schatz said it became underused in its later years, proving that today's children are looking for an environment that has more of a video arcade environment.