

WORDS OF WISDOM "Do not read beauty magazines. They will only make you feel ugly." – From *(Everybody's Free) to Wear Sunscreen*, by Baz Luhrmann (using words written by Mary Schmich, pictured).



It's a hit ... (from right) Chelsea Gompels, 8, and Lucas Nadji, 10, glove up. Photo: Fiona Morris

TECHNOLOGY

Feeling wired?

Software is increasingly encouraging us to get off the couch and start moving, writes **Lia Timson**.



NE day, every exercise we do will be linked to technology. That's the view of researchers working on devices to help us run with a mate on the other side of the world (even if they are Olympic medallists) or play football against another city's team. The idea is to add exciting new dimensions to exercise to motivate people to improve their fitness.

It is the brainchild of Floyd Mueller and his Exertion Interfaces research group. Mueller is a master's graduate from the University of Melbourne and now a visiting lecturer at Stanford University in the US.

His prototypes are different to playing or exercising with friends via an Xbox 360 or Nintendo Wii, as they cater to much more physical outdoor sports and fitness activities. One of them, a wireless headband, allows runners in different locations to run together, even hearing each other's footsteps approaching or fading as they race ahead or fall behind.

"In one experiment, a runner even stopped and waited for his partner to catch up," Mueller says.

He believes we are already close to being "wired" for exercise most of the time, be it through inexpensive pedometers, free mobile phone apps or Nike+ sensors linking our shoe to our iPod.

"The more we embrace the opportunities for the

FIT FILE
Why not treat yourself to a new podcast or music download every time you go further than before in your exercise? Or every time you achieve a new personal-best time?

novel experiences these technologies can provide, the better Australia is equipped to address the obesity issue and possibly even teach the US and most other obesity-facing countries a few tricks," Mueller says.

"Australia has been very tech-friendly while embracing sports, so it seems a tremendous opportunity to bring these two together."

We can recruit our friends to help us stay healthy through Wi-Fi scales that post our dropping weight on Facebook or map our run using a GPS-enabled wristwatch or app, then track our progress against other joggers on various websites.

Video game manufacturers Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft have joined in the fun, adding exercise games to their Wii, PlayStation and Xbox Kinect repertoire, respectively.

But fitness experts say these games are unlikely to raise the kind of sweat needed to maintain fitness, unless they are properly supervised or gamers take them seriously. This means no cheating using rapid hand movements, for example, instead of proper boxing or swinging.

Although research on the efficacy of exercise games is not yet definitive, a review of 18 such studies by researchers at the University of Toronto and Canadian children's rehabilitation hospitals last year found energy expenditure and increases in heart rate during active video games were highly variable and provided, at best, only moderate physical activity. Health benefits were lower if games required only upper-body movements.

DON'T FORGET OUTDOORS

An exercise scientist and University of NSW lecturer, fitness expert Martha Lourey-Bird, says "exergames" can be positive, especially if all the family joins in, but they do not replace outside activities.

"Anything that is going to get the family more active is beneficial but they are only a replacement for an indoor sedentary game," she says.

While children in primary school should just enjoy the fun, teenagers can benefit from the competitive nature of some techno-driven games, Lourey-Bird says. Other lecturers suggest schools use the data collected from students' exercise routines for subjects such as mathematics and computing – using the results to build spreadsheets, for example.

TECHNO-KIDS ARE ACTIVE KIDS

Tom Harris plays a fierce game of baseball on Wii Sports, while other children sit on spin cycles racing through the Tour de France circuit.

Together, they play more physical games using Xavix machines or the Sportwall installed at Club V, a pint-sized gym for Virgin Active club members in Sydney's north.

"Sometimes, it's hard work but it's also good fun," says Tom, 10. "It's only the next day when your legs ache that you realise you were exercising, because you were just playing."

His vacation care mates agree that the pain they feel after a whole day of activities at the gym is of the nice variety.

"It feels nice to be sort of tired," says Lucas Nadji, also 10.

Taylah Blix, 10, who normally plays netball, also likes the exertion. "I like to know I'm doing exercise. It makes me feel better."

Under the supervision of trainers and among outdoor sport, children up to the age of 14 play only active video games in the hope they will develop a love of fitness, while their parents work or work out upstairs.

"Technology adds a fun dimension to it," says Virgin Active's national marketing manager, Toby Noble.

"If it was just an exercise bike, they wouldn't take notice but the fact it's got screens in front of it and they can interact makes them want to participate."

Lia Timson

"Technology can play a great motivational role but it's an optional extra," she says. "I don't want to see it as another barrier. Exercise can be free and easy and you don't need expensive equipment to do it."

Even taking the dog for a walk can improve students' concentration. "Exercise is a great way to reduce anxiety and stress and as a break from study," Lourey-Bird says. "It increases oxygen levels to the brain and muscles."

Her other tips include meeting friends at the basketball court or park for games, instead of hanging out at shops.



Let's get digital ... Floyd Mueller hopes technology can help Australia tackle obesity.