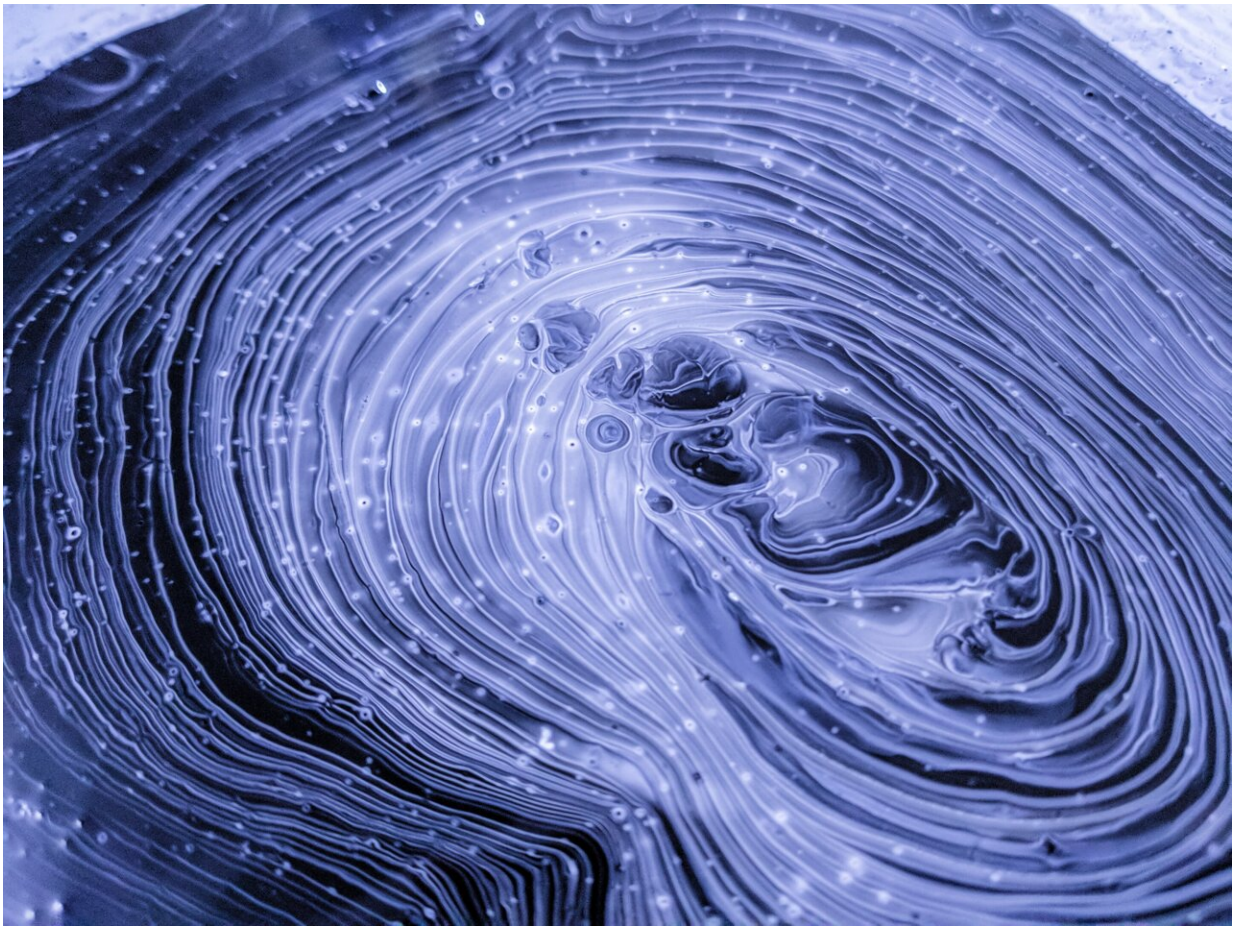
The rise of the Fitbit kids—a good move or a step too far?

August 30 2016, by Steve Goschnick



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

The concept of tracking your fitness with wearable technology is not

new but the rate at which activity trackers are being worn by school children, is. And it's causing quite a range of reactions.

In the UK, a mother withdrew her child from primary school because it stopped him from wearing his electronic fitness bracelet, although following protests the school later allowed pupils to wear Fitbits (except during physical education class).

In New Zealand, high school counsellors said they were concerned the Fitbit devices could become a fixation, particularly with girls trying to lose weight and keep fit.

In Australia, students in some schools are wearing these devices (for example, nine of the 24 in my daughter's grade 4 class) despite terms-of-service such as Fitbit's saying users should be aged over 13 to use its service.

As for older students, Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma said earlier this year it was giving new students the option of wearing of a Fitbit as part of its ongoing fitness program. However, this caused some concern and sparked an online petition over fears it could promote eating disorders.

What gets children moving?

You only have to witness the magnetic attraction between kids and their small screens to realise why the modern parent is looking for an antidote to the exercise aversion of their offspring.

There's no doubt most kids thrive on structure put around their lives, such as enforcing some screen-time limits. The introduction of self-governance for kids at home is generally one of gradual steps and missteps.

An attractive feature of activity-trackers is that they come with an app that children are able to locate and install at kid-speed.

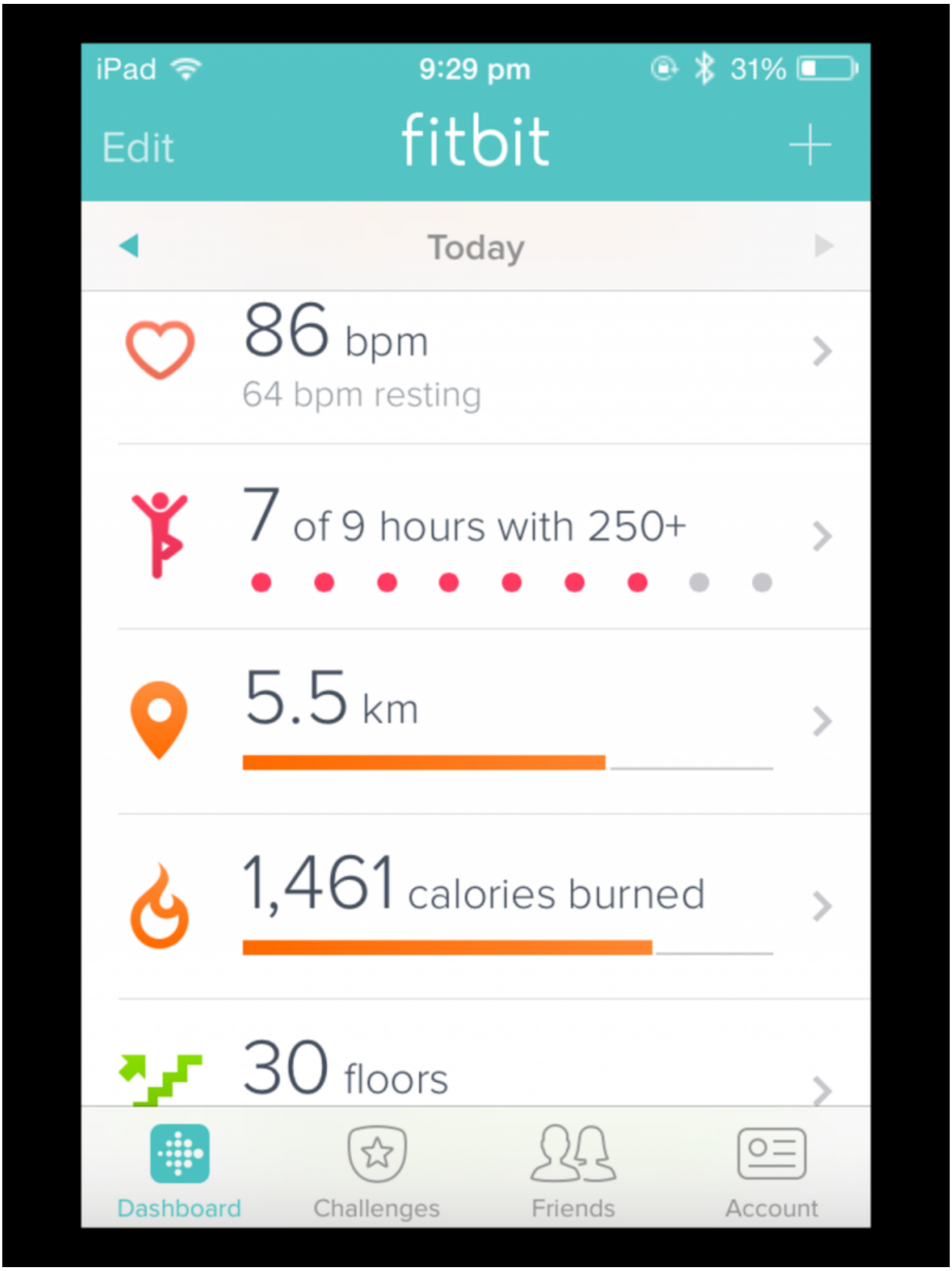
Your average self-tracking device does daily tallies for: steps-taken, kilometres-covered, calories-consumed and so on.

Parents will be happy to see children push up their daily step-count, and watch their young charges spending more time perusing exercise metrics and rewards, over first-person shooters and the demolition of rival buildings in Minecraft.

One reassuring aspect of the Fitbit daily dashboard, from the point of view of parents with slovenly kids in the home-zone, is that primary school kids are generally clocking-up lots of activity during their school day.

Self improvement

Researchers in pervasive computing see self-tracking as a significant tool in behavioural change in optimising one's self. From a sociology perspective, self-tracking is seen as heavily correlated with selfhood and identity.


iPad
9:29 pm
31%
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Today
86 bpm
64 bpm resting
7 of 9 hours with 250+
5.5 km
1,461 calories burned
30 floors
Dashboard
Challenges
Friends
Account

Dashboard of daily stats on the Fitbit app. Fitbit/Screenshot, Author provided

These devices collect new information about one's self, capturing raw data that was previously hard-won or totally unavailable, and then present it visually for reflection, all with little-to-no effort by the individual. In doing so they offer a new source of rich knowledge about oneself.

Australian research into the phenomenon of self-tracking points to a philosophical grounding offered by French philosopher Michel Foucault. That individuals have a moral and ethical imperative to take up practices that help them achieve happiness, healthiness and wisdom. Practises that nourish both body and soul.

But despite the emphasis on self in this whole new scheme of smart things, the information being collected by these devices is also held by corporate entities beyond the individual.

Employers, with a vested interest in their employees' health and well-being, are also getting enthusiastic about these fitness devices.

In September 2015, the US retail giant Target offered more than 300,000 free Fitbit Zip devices to improve the wellness of employees, and the corporate image.

Some health insurance companies in the US and elsewhere, are now offering savings for people that wear such devices.

Any concerns?

So, what is the range of the growing concerns being raised about these

self-tracking devices?

The computer scientist Jaron Lanier, author of Who Owns the Future?, was strapping technology onto his body back in the 1980s and has a good overarching measure of the dangers inherent in self-tracking:

There are two dangers: one is compromising privacy and the other is (that) participants can narrow themselves. Extreme adherents hyperconcentrate on certain kinds of numbers about themselves, and it can make them a little more robotic than other people.

Nonetheless, he missed the problem of low-grade devices. Fastfood giant McDonalds recently issued STEP-iT Activity Bands with Happy Meals in the US with 33 million Chinese-made wristbands set to go, only to recall them this month when burns and skin irritations were reported.

A growing concern is that self-tracking is becoming self-surveillance. And yet, in the public health domain self-tracking technologies dovetail nicely with the emphasis on self-management, on moving some personal responsibility and control back to individuals who require care.

It largely comes down to who has access to the data, what they use it for, and whether they have appropriate permission to do so.

Still, if it gets children off the couch and doing more exercise in the real world, by the time they are fit and healthy young adults they may well have cast off the activity tracking bracelet.

Or it just may evolve into a permanent augmentation, facilitating an optimised human life, from cradle to grave.

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