

Understanding Physical Literacy: A Canadian Perspective



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Created by the Sport for Life team in collaboration with Sport Ireland and Dr. Melanie McKee, Stranmillis University College.

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Introduction

This booklet aims to support the understanding and implementation of physical literacy through the Canadian Physical Literacy Consensus Statement (2015), based on a shared national vision for physical literacy.

The primary objectives are to:

- Provide a unified definition of physical literacy for Canada.
- Facilitate a consistent understanding of physical literacy across sectors.
- Advocate for integrating physical literacy into policy, practice, and research in all physical activity settings.
- Encourage collaboration between national and local organizations to strategically develop physical literacy across Canada.
- Promote lifelong participation in physical activity for everyone in Canada.

This booklet supports the June 2015 [Physical Literacy Consensus Statement](#) by addressing 13 common questions about physical literacy.



1. How is physical literacy defined?

In Canada, physical literacy is *“the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life.”* The Canadian Physical Literacy Consensus Statement established this definition, which reflects a holistic approach to lifelong physical activity.

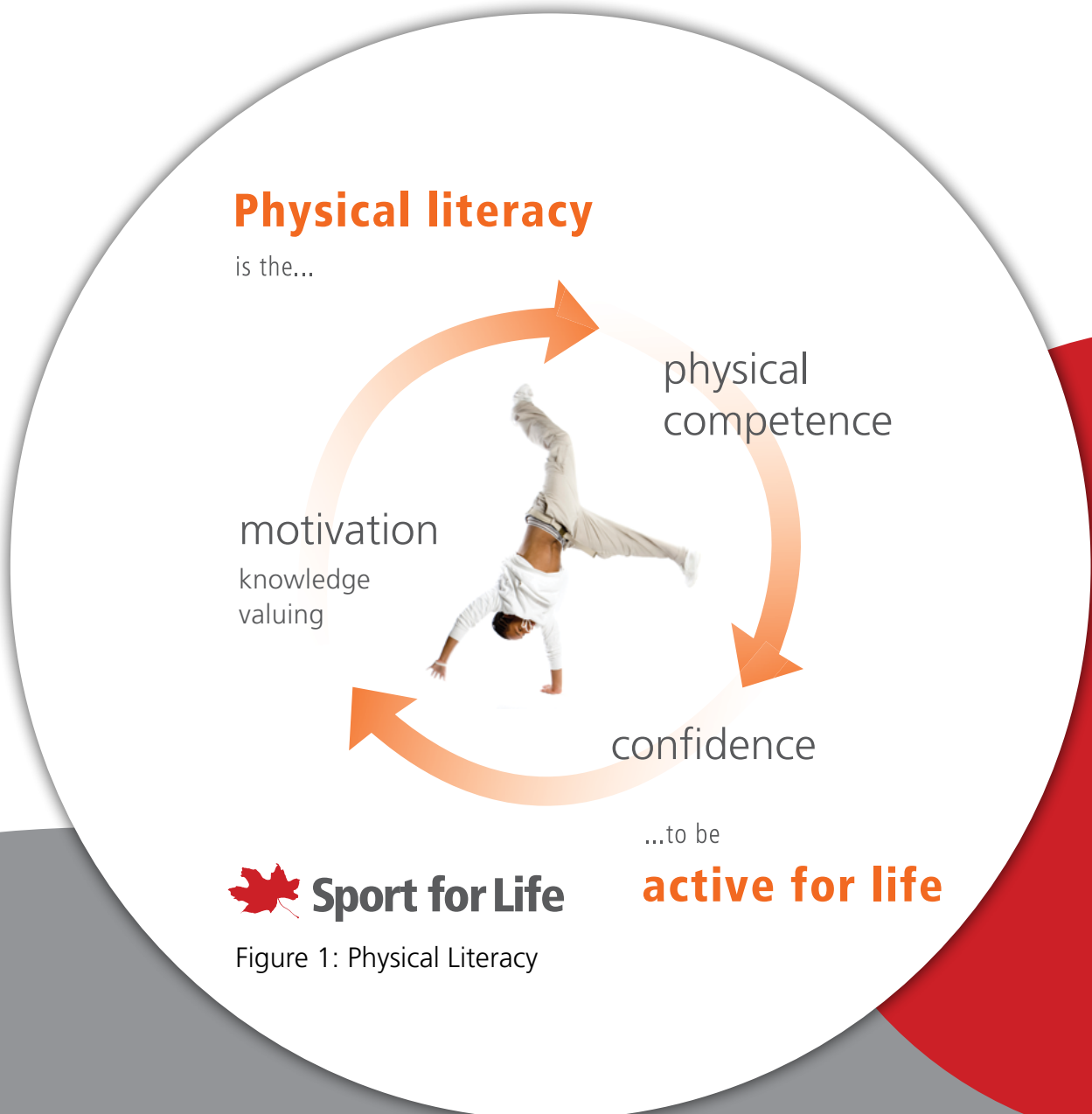


Figure 1: Physical Literacy

2. What are the elements of physical literacy?

The Canadian definition includes four essential and interconnected elements whose relative importance may change throughout life. These elements are key for fostering a lifelong relationship with physical activity and serve as the building blocks for participation in both structured sports and unstructured recreational play.

The elements are:

- **Motivation and Confidence** (Affective): Motivation and confidence encompass an individual's enthusiasm, enjoyment, and self-assurance in making physical activity an integral part of their life.
- **Physical Competence** (Physical): Physical competence refers to a person's ability to develop movement skills and patterns and the capacity to experience a variety of movement intensities and durations. Enhanced physical competence enables an individual to participate in a wide range of physical activities and settings, including land, water, ice/snow, and air.
- **Knowledge and Understanding** (Cognitive): Knowledge and understanding include identifying and expressing the essential qualities that influence movement, comprehending the health benefits of an active lifestyle, and recognizing the appropriate safety features associated with physical activity in various settings and physical environments.
- **Engagement in physical activities for life** (Behavioural): Engagement in physical activities for life refers to an individual embracing physical literacy by being active regularly. It involves prioritizing and maintaining participation in a range of meaningful and personally challenging activities as an integral part of one's lifestyle.



The Canadian approach recognizes that these elements interact dynamically and are shaped by developmental stage, environment, and experience. Developing the cognitive, affective, and physical domains together is essential for a holistic approach to physical literacy.

3. Why is physical literacy important?

Physical Activity: In Canada, physical literacy serves as a gateway to and an outcome of lifelong participation in sport and physical activity, ranging from recreational to competitive levels. This engagement brings numerous benefits associated with being active.

Health Benefits: Physical literacy promotes overall well-being, contributing to benefits such as reducing the risk of non-communicable diseases like cardiovascular disease and diabetes, improving mental health, and enhancing cognitive function.

Environmental Benefits: Physical literacy contributes to environmental sustainability by promoting active transportation, such as walking and cycling, and encouraging

engagement with outdoor spaces, aligning with Canada's broader health and environmental goals.

Social-Emotional Benefits: Physical literacy fosters social engagement with peers and communities while providing emotional benefits like stress reduction and improved mood to maintain mental wellness.



4. Can a person be described as 'physically literate'?

Yes, but in Canada, describing someone as physically literate does not imply an end state but rather an ongoing journey. Physical literacy develops throughout life, from early childhood to older adulthood, with varying levels of competence and confidence at different stages. While setbacks may occur, the journey continues to adapt as necessary. Therefore, being physically literate means that an individual;

- is on a unique lifelong journey of movement
- is cultivated and enjoyed through a range of experiences in different environments and contexts
- is valued and nurtured throughout life
- supports holistic development and well-being



5. How can physical literacy be developed?

Physical literacy is developed through diverse and meaningful physical activities across various environments. In Canada, the Sport for Life and Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity (LTD) frameworks focus on providing a variety of movement experiences in early childhood and continuing through life. Quality programming supports physical literacy by developing motivation, building confidence, improving physical competence, and sharing knowledge and understanding.



6. Where can physical literacy be developed?

Physical literacy begins at birth and develops in diverse environments, including land, water, snow, and air. Canada's diverse geography encourages participation in many settings, from urban parks and sports fields to lakes and snowy landscapes. Communities nationwide foster physical literacy in daycare and recreation centers, schools, natural outdoor spaces, and sports clubs.

Developing Physical Literacy in Different Environments

For Canadians, physical literacy goes beyond the gym or sports field; it encompasses a wide range of environments:

- **Land:** Traditional sports and games, including soccer, basketball, volleyball, baseball, and track and field, are played in fields or gymnasiums, while outdoor activities like walking, running, hiking, and trekking occur in natural settings.

- **Water:** Swimming, canoeing, and other aquatic activities are essential in a country with thousands of lakes, rivers, and extensive ocean coastlines.
- **Ice and Snow:** Due to Canada's cold climate and mountainous terrain, winter sports like skating, skiing, luge, and snowboarding play a crucial role in developing physical competence.
- **Air:** Activities like gymnastics, diving, parkour, and trampoline develop coordination and body awareness, as do winter sports like snowboard half-pipe and aerials skiing, which are popular in Canada's outdoor settings.

Experiencing diverse environments develops a broader skill set, ensuring Canadians can engage in physical activities in any context for life.



Figure 2: Four Elements

7. Can physical literacy be assessed?

In Canada, practitioners observe physical literacy using the **Physical Literacy Assessment for Youth (PLAY) Tools**, developed by the **University of Manitoba** and **Sport for Life**. The PLAY framework assesses physical literacy across various domains in children and youth, focusing on their progress in movement skills, confidence, and motivation progress. The PLAY Tools track personal growth over time rather than comparing participants to predetermined standards or peers.

The tools within the PLAY framework include:

- **PLAYfun:** Assesses movement competence through various fundamental movement skills.
- **PLAYbasic:** A simplified version of **PLAYfun**.
- **PLAYself:** A self-assessment tool where individuals reflect on their confidence, competence, and motivation in physical activity.
- **PLAYparent:** Enables parents to observe and record their child's physical literacy development.
- **PLAYcoach:** Enables coaches to observe a participant's physical literacy and provide tailored feedback for improvement.

This approach encourages a supportive, non-competitive environment that celebrates individual progress and reinforces physical literacy as a lifelong journey rather than a finite achievement. By using the PLAY Tools, practitioners and parents can support children and youth in developing the confidence and competence needed to stay active for life.



8. What are the practical applications of physical literacy?

Integrating physical literacy into Canadian schools and communities is critical for fostering participation across all age groups. Initiatives such as Physical Literacy for Communities (PL4C), School Physical Literacy and Physical Activity (SPA-PL), and PISE Physical Literacy for Kids are great examples of impactful initiatives. Additionally, integrating physical literacy into physical education curricula across Canada provides the foundation for developing movement skills early in life.

At the community level, partnerships between National Sport Organizations (NSOs), Provincial Sport Organizations (PSOs), and local sport and recreation organization apply physical literacy principles in their sport and physical activity programming. Coaching education programs provided by the Coaching Association of Canada integrate physical literacy concepts, equipping coaches to promote these skills at all levels.



9. Who is responsible for developing physical literacy?

Each individual should take responsibility for developing their physical literacy. In Canada, this responsibility is shared across society, involving parents, teachers, coaches, health practitioners, educators and recreation professionals, and community organizations. National agencies like the Public Health Agency of Canada, Sport Canada and organizations such as Sport for Life and Physical and Health Education Canada promote physical literacy at the policy level. Local clubs and schools implement programs to support its development.



10. What underpins physical literacy?

Underpinning physical literacy are the following points:

1. It helps individuals develop holistically.
2. It is inclusive and accessible to all Canadians regardless of age, gender, ability, sexual orientation, religion, race, socioeconomic status, etc.
3. Each person embarks on a lifelong journey to develop it.
4. Positive movement experiences drive its development.
5. Individuals, communities, and society share responsibility for fostering it.
6. Social support from family, peers, and coaches is vital in nurturing it.
7. It thrives in cultures that prioritize and promote physical activity.

By adapting the guide's key elements to the Canadian context, we align national frameworks like the Long-Term Development (LTD) Framework, The Common Vision, and the Physical Literacy Consensus Statement with Canadian cultural values and priorities, such as inclusivity, accessibility, and lifelong engagement in physical activity. This approach integrates physical literacy into Canada's education, recreation, sport, and health sectors, making it relevant and actionable for organizations, educators, and policymakers.



11. How does physical literacy support Canada's Long-Term Development (LTD) Framework?

Canada's LTD framework emphasizes the progressive development of physical literacy, ensuring Canadians of all ages and abilities remain active throughout their lives. Physical literacy is particularly important in the Active Start, FUNdamentals, and Learn to Train stages, where individuals develop the essential movement skills that form the foundation for all sports and physical activities.

By integrating physical literacy into the LTD framework, Canadian sport organizations and schools are better equipped to deliver inclusive, diverse programming that supports the holistic development of participants. This approach aligns with Canada's national priorities of inclusivity, accessibility, and well-being.

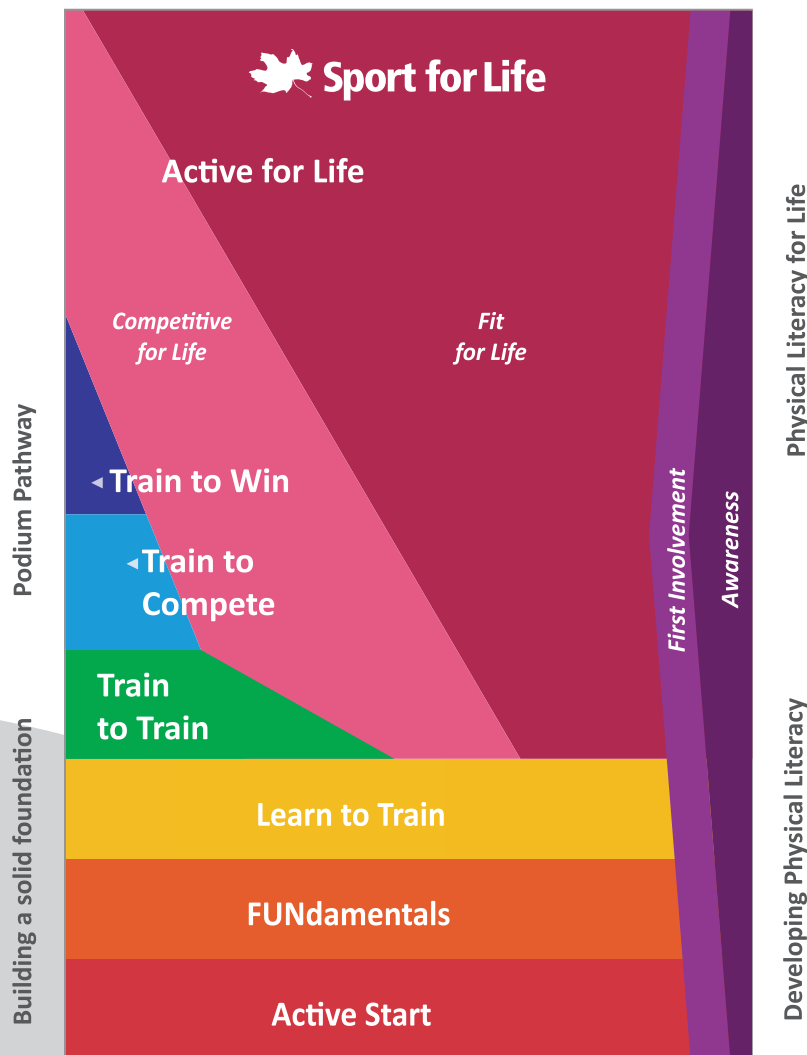


Figure 3: Long-Term Development Framework

12. Are physical literacy, physical activity, and physical education interrelated?

Yes, they are closely connected, each serving distinct roles within the broader framework of health and movement development. Here's how they differ:

1. Physical literacy encompasses the motivation, confidence, understanding, and ability to engage in various physical activities. It's a holistic approach that combines mental, emotional, and physical aspects.
2. Physical activity refers to any movement that requires energy, whether structured or unstructured. It is the actual "doing" of movement and encompasses various activities, from exercise to daily tasks.
3. Physical education is formal, curriculum-based instruction that teaches students about movement, fitness, and health. It focuses on learning outcomes and skill development in a school or educational setting.

While physical education provides a foundation for learning these skills, physical activity is the application of those skills in real-life situations. Physical literacy represents the overall capability and motivation to stay engaged in physical activity for life.

We want more
Physical Activity



that develops
Fundamental Movement Skills



because fundamental movement skills are a key component of
Physical Literacy



Figure 4: Physical Activity and Physical Literacy

13. Can being physically literate equate to being athletic?

Being physically literate means having the tools to confidently and competently engage in various physical activities throughout life, focusing on enjoyment, health, and well-being. Athleticism refers to physical traits that facilitate high-level performance in specific sports or physical tasks, often in a competitive setting.

While a physically literate person could also be athletic, the two are different. Someone can be

physically literate without being an elite athlete, and an athletic person may lack physical literacy, especially if they specialize in one sport or skill.

Ideally, every Canadian develops their physical literacy as a foundation for reaching their full potential, whether competing internationally or living a fulfilling life.



Conclusion: A Canadian Vision for Physical Literacy

Developing physical literacy is central to Canada's vision for a healthier, more active society. By integrating physical literacy into schools, community sport programs, and national frameworks (LTD), Canada is creating pathways to lifelong engagement in physical activity. A strong foundation in physical literacy improves individual well-being and supports social, economic, and public health goals.

For more detailed guidelines on physical literacy, visit physicalliteracy.ca and refer to the [Canadian Physical Literacy Consensus Statement \(2015\)](#).



Resources

Learn More

- **Sport for Life Education Program:**
sportforlife.ca/education
- **Sport for Life Resources List:**
sportforlife.ca/resources
- Physical Literacy:
physicalliteracy.ca

References

- **Developing Physical Literacy 2.0:**
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