



# Early Start, Active for Life

## What is Physical Literacy?

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### WHAT IS PHYSICAL LITERACY?

Most of us are familiar with the term *language literacy*. It means we are able to use our language actively and passively in a variety of ways including reading, writing, and speaking. Similarly, the term *physical literacy* means that we are able to move our bodies with competence and confidence in a wide variety of physical activities across multiple environments.<sup>1</sup>

Physical literacy is important across the lifespan from infant to older adults. Infants are just learning to crawl, walk and hold items whereas older adults are trying to preserve their ability to lift, reach and bend to help maintain their independence and perform activities of daily living as they age. And while physical literacy looks different at every age of the lifecycle, for young children it is focused on gaining independence to become healthy, active adolescents.

Physical literacy is the  
“motivation,  
confidence, physical  
competence,  
knowledge and  
understanding to  
value and take  
responsibility for  
engagement in  
physical activities  
for life”

*International Physical Literacy Association*



Studies show that skilled preschoolers  
make active adolescents!

### THE YOUNG CHILD AND PHYSICAL LITERACY

A young child who is physically literate is one who has the motivation, confidence, knowledge, skills, and fitness necessary to enjoy a physically active lifestyle AND who is committed to healthy habitual movement behaviors, including recommended regular physical activity and limited sedentary behavior.”

This includes factors like:

- **Physical Activity** - body movement that enhances health and increases energy expenditure
- **Fundamental Movement Skills** - building blocks for basic movement such as balance, locomotor (run, jump, hop, skip), non-locomotor (twist, spin, bend, lift, swinging), and object control (throw, catch, kick)
- **Perceptual Motor Development** - hand-eye coordination (hitting a baseball), spatial awareness (moving high, low, forward, backward), brain to body connection (right hand touches left knee), and speed (fast vs slow)
- **Capacity** - knowledge, competency and understanding
- **Motivation** - enthusiasm to try new activities and be active on a daily basis
- **Confidence** - self-reliance and assuredness that she is able to move and be physically active.



## FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PHYSICAL LITERACY

Just as there are barriers to developing *language* literacy such as lack of education, limited exposure, socio-economic disparities, etc., there are also barriers to mastering *physical* literacy. A number of factors can limit a child's ability to live a healthy active life. These factors include genetic makeup, gender, ethnicity or race. Sometimes families have certain stigmas or societal norms about playing sports (e.g. "girls shouldn't play ball"). Some children may not come from athletic or active families that support their interest. Children may have economic limitations as some activities are expensive (uniforms, registration, transportation, etc.). Others may have chronic conditions such as asthma or visual or hearing disabilities. Weather conditions or how far a child lives from the park or playground can be a barrier. Or maybe the playgrounds and parks aren't perceived by the parent as safe. All of these conditions or limitations can hinder a child's ability to be a healthy, active child and adolescent.

## WHAT CAN I DO TO PROMOTE PHYSICAL LITERACY?

- **Provide planned activities with a specific goal or purpose in mind.** Planned physical activity lessons have been shown to produce higher levels of physical activity in children; find fun and engaging ways to reinforce fundamental movement skills and perceptual motor development (such as organized games). Visit the Healthy Kids Resource Center [[extension.unr.edu/healthykids](http://extension.unr.edu/healthykids)] for fun activities & games.
- **Expose children to a variety of opportunities** including outside traditional sports (such as dance, karate or gymnastics) to help children find activities they enjoy. Avoid early specialization (limiting a young child to one sport) as it can cause related stress. Try as many activities as the child is excited about. Be creative with children who have limitations. Children with disabilities & chronic illness are often more motivated than their able-bodied peers, therefore it is necessary to find or adapt activities to match children's abilities.
- **Support the child's interests** Avoid the simple "go out and play" approach. Instead, be a role model. Engage in activities with the child and include the whole family. Even if you aren't athletic, children love to compete with adults and it's ok if they win!
- **Look for available free and discounted community resources** that provide physical activities (such as after school programs, Boys and Girls Club, Parks and Rec Centers, YMCA, 4-H, etc.)
- **Create indoor opportunities** such as dancing and playing active games (especially if safety and weather are a concern).

Physical literacy is a journey that everyone takes throughout their life.

Is it not something one does or does not have, nor something one does or does not do.

It is the individual's lived experience of physical activity.



EXTENSION

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## REFERENCES

1. Physical Literacy in the United States: A Model, Strategic Plan and Call to Action. The Aspen Institute Project Play. Retrieved from <http://plreport.projectplay.us/>