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Physical Literacy—Being Active to Live Your Best Life

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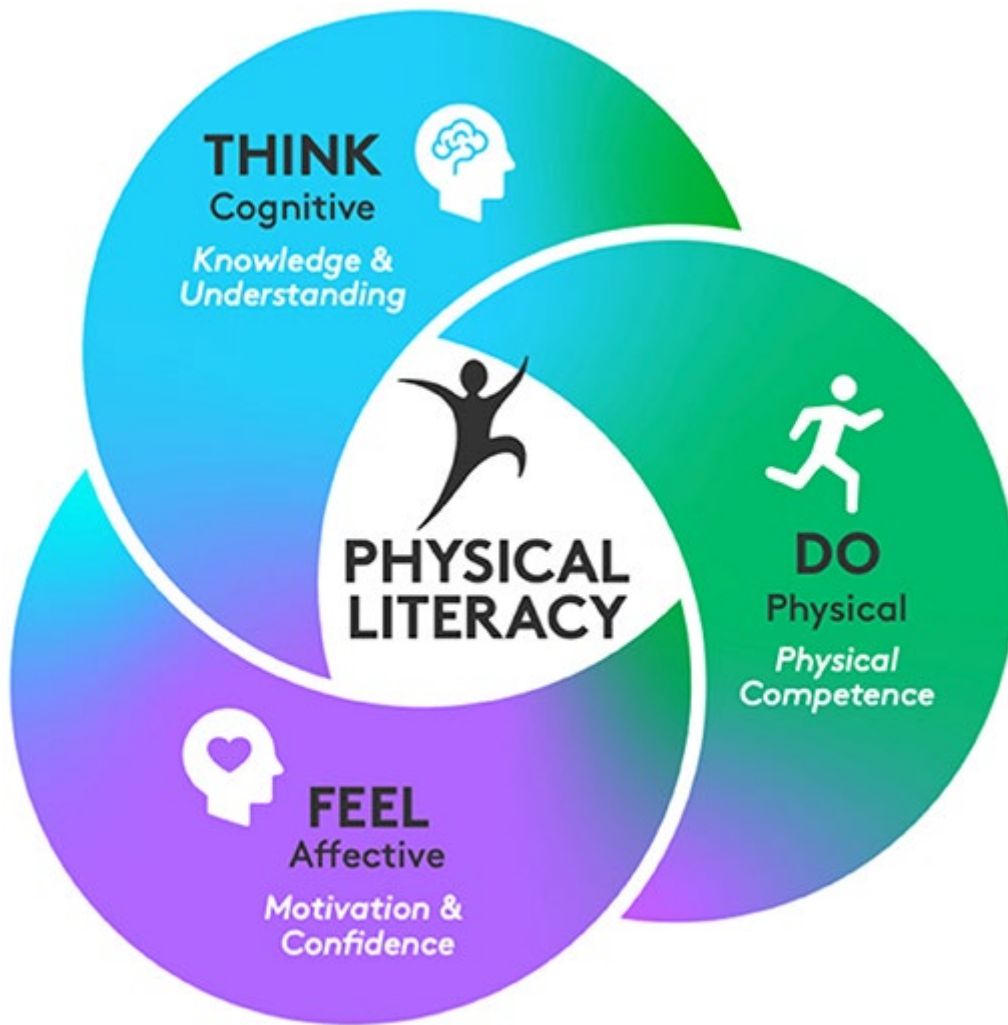
Abstract

Being active is good for both our minds and bodies, but many people worldwide are not moving enough. There are lots of reasons for this, and there are lots of ways we can help people to move more. Just like literacy is about our ability to read and write, physical literacy is about our ability to be active, as well as understanding what we enjoy and value about being active. Our thoughts, feelings, and all the physical activities that we have done before impact how we feel about moving. Playing in a park with friends and trying hard to catch a ball are examples of things that can change how we think about being active, now and in the future. Physical literacy is different for everyone, and it changes all the time. This article will explain what physical literacy is and why it is a very important part of growing up.

What is Physical Literacy?

[Physical literacy](#) has become popular in the last 30 years. The words came about when a physical education teacher named Margaret Whitehead became concerned that more and more young people were finding it difficult to be active. She wanted people to start thinking about movement in a new way [1].

Physical literacy is now important across the world, and many countries have come up with different explanations of physical literacy, in terms of what is important for them [2–4]. For example, [Figure 1](#) shows how people in Ireland and Northern Ireland decided to define physical literacy, and [Figure 2](#) shows how the term is defined a little bit differently in England.



- Figure 1 - After lots of research and working with a lot of different people, this is the picture people across Ireland use to explain physical literacy—called the All-Island Physical Literacy Consensus Statement.

Physical literacy is our relationship with movement and physical activity throughout life.

A personal relationship

Having a positive and meaningful association with movement and physical activity.



Movement and physical activity

How we move (physical), connect (social), think (cognitive) and feel (affective) during movement and physical activity plays a crucial role.



Throughout life

Influenced across the lifecourse by individual, social and environmental factors.



- Figure 2 - After lots of research and working with a lot of different people, this is the picture people across England use to explain physical literacy—called the Sport England Consensus Statement.

Across the world, there are some key points about physical literacy that all countries almost always agree on:

- How we move, connect, think, and feel during movement and [physical activity](#) is important. The phrase “head, heart, hands” can sometimes help people remember that physical literacy is about what we think, feel, and do in relation to physical activity. Developing how we think, feel, and do can help us move in specific ways.
- Lots of skills and qualities support physical literacy. These include physical skills like balance and coordination, and other things like confidence and motivation. Working as part of a team and decision making are also important. Learning and developing even some of these things can help you to move however you want to move.
- It is personal! What physical activity means to you, and what you enjoy and value about activity can be different to how your friends and family feel about activity; and that is perfectly ok. Everyone’s physical literacy is different.
- Someone’s relationship with physical activity can grow and change over time. How we like moving can be affected by our thoughts and feelings, but also by other things like places and other people.

Why is Physical Literacy Important?

Scientists have shown that being physically active is important for our wellbeing, which means it helps to keep us well physically, mentally, and socially. There are lots of ways to be active. It can be at a sports club, in the park with your friends, helping a family member do housework, playing actively during breaktime at school, walking to the shops, or running around in your PE lesson. The World Health Organization (WHO) is an international group of scientists who give advice and help people to be healthier. The WHO says young people should do at least 60 min of activity a day that gets them out of breath, a bit sweaty, and makes their hearts beat faster [5]. The WHO also wants young people to do activity that strengthens their bones and muscles at least three times a week—this could be things like climbing, carrying the groceries, or helping do some gardening. You might already do this, and if you do, fantastic!

But all over the world, lots of young people find it difficult to do the amount of activity scientists say they need. There are lots of different reasons for this. Some young people might think they are not very good at sports, some find it difficult to find time to fit physical activity in with school and homework, and some might just feel they do not like being active and prefer other things. We do physical literacy research with people from all over the world, which is our way of helping people become more active. This research is starting to change how schools and sports clubs think. People can see that it is especially important because physical literacy has been linked with health, wellbeing, and overall quality of life.

We are trying to help more young people be more active, more often. How someone feels about physical activity will often result in that person choosing to be active or not. Enjoying being active and seeing it as an important part of our daily lives helps us to have a great relationship with movement, and this makes us more likely to stay active. So, if we understand what affects

young people's relationships with movement and physical activity, we can maybe help more young people to be more active.

How to Develop Physical Literacy

Focusing on physical literacy means trying to help more young people to lead active lives now, but also into their futures. For younger kids, grown-ups can be important for helping young people develop physical literacy. Your parents, teachers, and coaches are some of the most important grown-ups who can help you and other young people develop physical literacy. There are lots of ways they can help.

Offering Many Types of Activities

Taking part in lots of activities that focus on developing important movement skills such as running, jumping, throwing, catching, kicking, and balancing is important for physical literacy. This should be in different types of sports, and in different environments (for example the park, the playground, sports fields, and lots more). This variety helps people become skilled in a wide range of movements and helps them develop how they think and feel about movement—both on their own and while playing with other people. Technology, which sometimes means young people spend more time with phones, tablets, and televisions than they do being active, can also be used positively, to find out about new activities and clubs.

Taking Part and Having Fun

Activity sessions should use games, challenges, and activities that are interesting and enjoyable for young people. Fun activities encourage participation and make kids want to learn new skills. Grown-ups should make sure that taking part, improving skills, and enjoyment are the main priorities. Grown-ups should make sure that the atmosphere in activity sessions is one in which all young people feel they have a voice, choice, and the chance to develop.

Take Things Step by Step

Rather than starting with the hard skills that adults might use in a sport, grown-ups should break these skills down into smaller, more manageable steps for young people to learn. Providing clear instructions, demonstrations, and allowing young people to explore movement helps kids learn and develop at their own pace.

Providing Positive Feedback

It is important that grown-ups appreciate young people's efforts and improvements, regardless of how well they might be able to do the skill. When coaches, teachers, or parents let young people know they are impressed with their effort and point out what they are doing well and how they can improve, it builds confidence and self-esteem. When kids feel confident and good about themselves in a particular activity, they are much more likely to keep taking part. Simple sentences like "well done" or "keep up the great effort" often makes kids' bodies and minds feel good.

Exploring, Creating, and Making Decisions

It is important that young people feel comfortable trying new things and experimenting with different movements and skills. Grown-ups need to encourage young people to trust themselves and to be creative and solve problems as they encounter challenges and obstacles in activity and movement situations. Young people should get the chance to learn to work well

with others, to be a good winner/loser, to take on leadership roles within a group, and to take part in decisions being made about the activity. This helps kids develop feelings of responsibility and social skills.

Everyone Can Take Part

Everyone is different, learns differently, and moves differently. But it is important that everyone gets the chance to move, learn, and develop physical literacy. Coaches and teachers should adapt and modify activities and exercises to make sure that no young person is left out.

Physical Literacy is Not Just for Kids

Physical literacy does not stop when you grow up, it is just as important for your grandparents as it is for you! As you get older, there are things you can do yourself to help your physical literacy, but the most important is to keep moving all your life, by finding activities you enjoy. This sounds simple, but you are more likely to keep active if you find activities that are fun. There are lots of different organized sports you can try such as football, swimming, dancing, or gymnastics. But free play—making up games or activities yourself or with friends—is just as valuable. Grown-ups can help you try different things, so you can work out what you find the most fun. As you get older, you can have more freedom around the choice of activities you take part in.

So now you know what physical literacy is, maybe take a minute to think about what physical activity you really like doing. What is it about that activity that makes it your favorite? We really hope you get the chance to do that movement soon!

Glossary

Physical Literacy: [↑](#) A way to describe a person's relationship with physical activity. Our thoughts, feelings, and things that we have done before all impact how we feel about moving and exercising.

Physical Activity: [↑](#) When you move your body, like when you ride your bike, play with friends, or go swimming. There are lots of different ways to be physically active.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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