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Christina Loitz is the Knowledge Translation Specialist at the Alberta Centre for Active Living. Her work includes carrying out and supporting the development, implementation, and evaluation of the Centre's knowledge translation activities, such as the creation of new and ongoing resources, publications, events, websites and research.

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The Importance of Lifelong Physical Literacy

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Developing and maintaining physical literacy is a lifelong journey. There have been different interpretations of physical literacy, but experts identify that each person's level of physical literacy partly depends on their fundamental movement skills, confidence level, degree of motivation and ABCs of movement (agility, balance, coordination and speed).

One well-known definition of physical literacy states:

As appropriate to each individual's endowment, physical literacy can be described as a disposition in which individuals have the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for maintaining purposeful physical pursuits throughout the lifecourse (Whitehead, 2010).

Sometimes, people think the term "fundamental movement skills" is the same as physical literacy. This is not the case. In fact, fundamental movement skills are only one (very important) aspect of physical literacy.

About Fundamental Movement Skills

Fundamental movement skills include basic movements such as throwing, kicking, running, jumping, hopping and catching (Canadian Sport Centres, 2011). When a child learns these skills, a solid physical ability foundation is created. In this way, the child is better positioned to be physically active as a child and teen.

In adulthood, a person will likely be physically active over time if they learned fundamental movement skills as a child. As an adult, they can draw from their own "library" of physical skills.

A good way to understand these concepts is to think of fundamental movement skills as the building blocks of physical literacy.



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Why do Adults Need Physical Literacy?

All adults and older adults need to have a minimum level of physical literacy to gain the health and other benefits associated with participating in physical activities, such as sports, exercise, work-related activities, and daily living.



Many occupations require a high level of physical fitness and physical literacy, such as construction tradespersons, labourers, military personnel, firefighters, paramedics, nurses, waitresses, cooks, warehouse workers, and oil rig workers (Nindl & Sharp, 2012). These occupations require physical strength and endurance, plus coordination, agility, balance and the confidence in one's ability to complete the job tasks and avoid injuries in the workplace.

Some basic examples of work tasks that require a high level of physical literacy include:

- hammering a nail while standing on a ladder;
- lifting a patient from a chair to bed; or
- carrying a full tray of dishes with a single arm while manoeuvring around obstacles.

Over time, an adult's physical literacy may fluctuate or diminish, depending on factors such as active or inactive lifestyle, health status, age, participation in sports, regular physical activities, workplace demands and work environments, daily habits and preferred interests.

Some adults or older adults already have good physical literacy, while others may be seeking to boost their fundamental movement skills, ABCs of movement, confidence, and/or motivation towards a higher level of physical literacy.

Although fundamental movement skills and ABCs of movement can be learned at any age, it typically takes more time and practice for adults to develop fundamental movement skills, especially compared to their childhood or teenage years.

People who are more physically literate are more likely to be active over time. They are also better at adapting to physical changes in their body and recovering from an injury or surgery.

Practitioners can play a helpful role with adults and older adults by:

- promoting understanding of the underlying components of physical literacy;
- supporting and encouraging people to develop fundamental movement skills and ABCs; and
- generally working or strategizing to boost confidence levels of clients/patients.

Physical Activity for All

Being physically literate is most often associated with being active in sports or vigorous exercise, but this is not always the case.

In order to develop physical literacy in adulthood, we must overcome the assumption that physical literacy is just for “jocks” participating in sport (Whitehead, 2010).

Physical activity is for all people. Some groups that are often overlooked include women, new Canadians, obese people, older adults, and people with mobility impairments.

A critical aspect of physical literacy is the confidence one has to do the activity or skill.

Using positive language, around physical activity and about one’s ability to do the physical skill or movement, is important in developing or maintaining self-confidence and physical literacy.

Physical literacy does not mean a certain level of competence on a scale for all; rather it’s the individual’s personal journey in physical movement which is specific to their life-situation (Whitehead, 2010).



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Maintaining Physical Literacy over Time

A person’s level of physical literacy directly impacts a variety of daily living activities. For instance, a person’s functional abilities related to personal care and independent living include the ability to maintain balance, agility and coordination. These are dependent on the neurological networks and muscular structures that guide movement and coordination (Canadian Sport Centres, 2011).

When a younger or middle-aged adult is healthy, these types of daily movement skills or physical abilities are often taken for granted. But, as a person ages or experiences physical or mobility impairments, daily living may become difficult. Other types of physical challenges can occur if a person is faced with bone, joint or muscle injuries, or other medical conditions or illnesses at any stage of adulthood.

Having good physical literacy can help people maintain their independence and make physical adaptations when facing the challenges that come with aging.

Conclusion

Developing and maintaining physical literacy throughout the years will help individuals to participate in physical activities and gain associated health benefits. When a person feels competent and skilled in fundamental movement skills and ABCs, it supports them in their work-related physical activity, their leisure-time physical activity and in all kinds of daily living activities.

Useful Links

Physical Literacy Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ayl6FQJ1-78
Produced by Canadian Sport for Life (Alberta community).

Information on Fundamental Movement Skills: www.phecanada.ca/programs/physical-literacy/what-physical-literacy/fundamental-movement-skills
From PHE Canada.

Information on Defining Physical Literacy: www.phecanada.ca/programs/physical-literacy
From PHE Canada.

ABCs of Movement: www.canadiansportforlife.ca/fundamental-skills/abcs-movement
Information about ABCs from Canadian Sport for Life.

For information about physical literacy for children, refer to:
WellSpring, August 2010 - Promoting Early Childhood Literacy in Alberta
WellSpring, June 2011 - Learning to Train: A Key Stage in Developing Physical Literacy

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Becoming Fluent in Alberta's Natural Beauty

Honourable Dave Rodney, Associate Minister of Wellness

If you were a newcomer arriving in Alberta for the first time, where would be the first outdoor place you would want to go?

Would you be captivated by the Rocky Mountains? Inspired by the immense prairie landscapes? Enchanted by our majestic forests?

Coming from outside of the province, or outside of Canada, you might have different names for the flowers, trees and species surrounding you, but they would still speak to you in the same way.

No matter what language we speak, we all know instinctively that being outside in nature is good for us.

In nature we can find rejuvenation, harmony and balance. Dip that canoe paddle into the cold, blue lake water, or take those first steps of a day-long hike, and you encounter both the world and yourself.

Too often in our busy lives, we can be challenged to find the time and energy to get outdoors. Yet it's so energizing when we do.

That's why the provincial government encourages Albertans to lead healthier lifestyles by providing information on active living, so we can all enjoy the benefits of being outdoors in nature. To learn more, please visit www.healthyalberta.com.

We want nature to become a second language for all Albertans - our newest residents and those whose families have been here for generations.

So what are you waiting for? There's so much to see and explore in our province. Get outdoors and become more fluent in Alberta's natural beauty. Stay safe and have fun.



Honourable Dave Rodney (BA, BEd, MRE), MLA Calgary-Lougheed, has been a wellness champion during his three Legislative terms—during which he has served on over 2 dozen committees. He is an entrepreneur, filmmaker, writer, keynote speaker, educator, and is the first Canadian to summit Mt. Everest two times. He founded the “Top of the World Society for Children” with his wife Jennifer; and they have two wonderful sons.