

Physical literacy and active aging:

A holistic approach to physical activity promotion

How do cognitive, emotional, and social elements intertwine in the pursuit of lifelong active living?

by Rebecca Lloyd, PhD, and Stephen Smith, PhD

The benefits of being physically active throughout the life course are tremendous, not only from a disease-prevention perspective,^{1,2} but also in terms of the positive feelings of moving with and alongside others.^{3,4} However, simply advising others to become more active is ineffective without considering how they feel when moving and the extent of social, emotional, and community support available to maintain active motivation.^{5,6,7}

Movement can be associated with fear or negative feelings that may originate from early experiences on school playgrounds or group affiliations where games, sports, dancing, and other recreational activities

were avoided. A broader perspective than just the physiological one is essential to inspire children, youth, and adults to engage in meaningful movement.

Physical literacy, a holistic concept integrating cognitive, physical, affective [emotional], and behavioral dimensions of movement,⁸ is increasingly recognized in health-promotion research and practice.^{9,10,11,12,13,14} Literacy in any field implies a certain degree of knowledge and understanding necessary for making informed decisions. In the realm of sustained physical activity, the multifaceted concept of physical literacy shows particular promise, especially in promoting active aging. Beyond a cognitive and behavioral approach, physical literacy encompasses the importance of positive motivation and an affirmative environment essential for maintaining functional and enjoyable movement throughout life.

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What is physical literacy?

A United Kingdom physical education scholar, philosopher, and founder of the International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA), Margaret Whitehead, introduced the holistic concept of physical literacy in the early 1990s to emphasize human flourishing¹⁵ and embodied educational practice.¹⁶ Whitehead was concerned about the way physical activity was treated in schools, focusing mainly on physical fitness and skill development to the neglect of cognitive and affective dimensions.¹⁷ Her aim was to radically change how we think of movement, not just in the school environment, but across the life course.¹⁸ She advocated for considering not only the interconnections between the body and mind, but also how movement meaningfully connects us to each other and the world we live in.^{15,17}

Over the past 30 years, physical literacy has become a central feature of physical education reform worldwide.^{12,19,20,21,17}

It has also influenced the development of conceptual frameworks guiding physical education, coaching, sport, and recreation associations, such as the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE America) in the United States, Physical and Health Education Canada, the Canadian Sport for Life Society, Australian Sports Commission (formerly Sport Australia), and Sport England. For example, see the open-access “Long-Term Development Model in Sport and Physical Activity 3.0” by Sport for Life [refer to “Resources”]. Physical literacy has been instrumental in advocating for children’s rights (see UNESCO in “Resources”) and has elevated the value of physical education as a subject in its own right.

Many online resources have been developed to assist professionals with the implementation and assessment of physical literacy, such as the Canadian Assessment of Physical Literacy, Play Tools, and Passport for Life. These resources have also highlighted some misinterpretations of physical literacy that have emerged over the years, such as an overemphasis on school-age children and on the physical domain in terms

of acquiring fundamental movement skills for sport participation.^{10,22,17,23} Such limited age-focused and narrow outcome-based conceptions overlook the process-oriented emphasis Whitehead placed on physical literacy as a lifelong journey of physical activity.^{24,25}

While several iterations of a working definition of physical literacy have evolved since its conception, the most widely accepted one in physical activity research and practice is from the International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA): “As appropriate to each individual, physical literacy can be described as the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engaging in physical activities for life.”¹⁷ Choosing physical activity for life (as depicted here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqMmUsI7kmg) means that regardless of age or circumstance, we can always find a way to be active.

How can we inspire ourselves and others to remain active for life? Table 1 indicates how we can explore each aspect of the multifaceted definition of physical literacy to understand how physical activity promotion can be more holistic.

Physical literacy and active aging

As researchers in physical literacy begin to focus on diverse populations, including older adults,^{11,22,7,27} new conceptual models and assessment approaches are emerging.^{28,29,30} The ecological model of physical literacy is one such development, shifting the focus from the individual’s acquisition of motivation, knowledge, and understanding to be active for life, to the role social interactivity plays in encouraging physical activity engagement.^{7,31}

Professionals beyond coaches and physical educators, like medical and rehabilitation experts,²⁷ are also being encouraged to contribute to physical literacy research, resource development, and policy formation in physical activity promotion. These

advancements allow for an examination of how the affective and social dimensions of physical literacy, particularly regarding movement confidence, relate to the physical aspects of movement competence. This emphasis on physical literacy is especially crucial for individuals facing major health setbacks and undergoing physical rehabilitation. Table 2 integrates the Physical Literacy Model for Older Adults: An Ecological Approach⁷ with practical tips for promoting physical literacy among older adults.³¹

Physical literacy and moving with joy

Despite advancements in advocating for individual, societal, and political rights in physical activity promotion, especially for older adults, physical literacy research has arguably overlooked the importance of cultivating a love of movement. Len Almond,³² in his 2010 chapter “Physical Literacy and the Older Adult Population,” emphasized that to counteract the alarming trend of increasing inactivity with age, it is crucial to “encourage everyone to love being active” (p. 129). This love of movement can sustain us through challenges when established movement patterns and actions require adaptation, attention, or support.

[Ed. A leading figure in the physical education field, Len Almond was foundation director and senior advisor to the British Heart Foundation National Centre for Physical Activity and Health. He also helped establish the National Coalition for Active Ageing (NCAA) in the UK.]

While young children naturally exhibit a love of movement, this enthusiasm often becomes elusive as we age. It is in response to this concerning fact that the concept of physical literacy offers significant value. To love moving is to relish the joys of moving competently and confidently, both alone and with others, across various environments. Let’s reflect on the various definitions and models of physical literacy and

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Mobilizing the definition of physical literacy into tangible action		
Physical literacy concept	Meaning	Questions to ask for physical activity promotion
Motivation	The most common theory of motivation linked to physical literacy is the Self-Determination Theory, which integrates both extrinsic and intrinsic sources of motivation. ^{11,17} Additionally, particularly in Japan, Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow, ²⁶ characterized as the enjoyable experience of effortless action, has been increasingly associated with the process of becoming physically literate. ²¹	What motivates you to be active? Do your external incentives to be active link to intrinsic motivations? What physical activities bring pleasure?
Confidence	The psychological construct of confidence is essential to consider when encouraging physical activity participation. Fear of getting hurt or worrying about how our performance compares to others will influence the degree to which we commit to being active.	Is the physical activity safe? Can you adapt your activity to make it easier or harder so that you build confidence as you progress through individualized levels of challenge and difficulty? Can you track progressive indicators of enhanced movement confidence?
Physical competence	Becoming skilled in any movement pattern demands practice, as well as an acute sense of body and spatial awareness, coupled with an understanding of physical force and timing. Thus, when engaging in a physical activity like walking, it's about more than just counting the number of steps. Being physically adept at walking involves a mindful approach to each step, ensuring movement is executed with both ease and grace.	Are you anatomically aligned for optimal movement? Are you paying attention to feelings of optimal movement force and/or timing in terms of moving in light versus heavy, or quick versus slow, or smooth versus sharp, ways?
Knowledge & understanding	Knowing about the health benefits and the guidelines for engaging in daily physical activity, such as targeting a balance of endurance, strength, and flexibility-promoting activities, develops a cognitive understanding for physical activity participation. The World Health Organization (WHO) and official government websites offer reliable guidelines for healthy physical activity engagement.	Are you able to gather, understand, and apply reputable resources that pertain to healthy physical activity participation? Are you able to discern a fad from a fact?
Value	Taking the time to consider what we value in life is crucial when it comes to being active with purpose. Whether it's scoring a point in a competitive game, performing and expressing ourselves, or simply being able to reach something from the top shelf, we all have our reasons for valuing physical activity in daily life. Figuring out what we personally value is an essential aspect of sticking with physical activity.	What movements bring meaning to your life? To what extent is your physical activity schedule centered around larger life meaning?
Responsibility & physical activity engagement	Taking responsibility for physical activity engagement involves actively seeking out the learning resources and necessary support to maintain an active lifestyle, especially during challenging times. Progress in this area is seldom linear. We can view the ups and downs of our physical activity setbacks and successes as part of a physical literacy journey, as suggested by Taplin. ²⁵ Additionally, it's beneficial to assess our progress at different stages of the life course, as highlighted by Green and colleagues. ²⁴	Can you look back on your physical literacy journey and focus on the different times when you were more or less active? Can you draw out lessons from these times for what helps or hinders your physical activity engagement?

Table 1. Mobilizing the definition of physical literacy into tangible action.

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contemplate how the love of movement might become more pronounced. Is it evident in the ways we exude physical confidence and competence? Do we recognize the importance of practicing, seeking educational support or guidance, and progressing to where movement feels effortless? Are we open to being emotionally moved by others, where our actions and interactions become affirmatively life-enhancing?

Experiencing physical literacy as active, interactive, and joyfully connected movement means fully embracing each moment as it unfolds in the here and now.^{33,34,35} We come to appreciate “the depth of one’s physicality and the physical expressivity of one’s relations to others” as an embodiment of joy in movement itself.³⁶ Feeling joy in action and interaction involves experiencing “[m]oments of vital contact with the world,” marked by bursts of energy, excitement, and surges of feeling.³⁷ As we consider this communicative, discernible approach to interacting with others through physical activity, we encourage advocates of physical literacy, particularly for older adults, to promote an “uplifting joyousness” as a foundation for ongoing, meaningful movement practices.³⁸

Embracing physical literacy for lifelong joyful movement

We hope this review of physical literacy literature and resources motivates more health and wellness professionals to value a holistic approach to physical activity promotion. While cognitive and scientific understanding is vital for grasping the principles of physical activity prescription, physical literacy offers a more comprehensive approach. This approach underscores the emotional, social, and ecological aspects, fostering a love of movement and enabling us to experience the joys of moving competently and confidently with others. As we continue to endorse practical physical activity that enhances movement functions and forms, we also urge you to consider the qualitative aspects, the impacts and influences, of moving through life energetically and vigorously. We especially encourage, through our InterActive for Life research as featured on <https://function2flow.ca/>, a focus on fostering joy in movement and meaningful interactions in physical activity promotion.

Becoming physically literate extends beyond simply acquiring the knowledge for making informed decisions about physical

activity. Being physically literate means embracing an active and interactive life, filled with joy, as we journey through the life course. 

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Ecological dimensions of physical literacy in action^{7,31}
(adapted from Jones, et al., 2018; Roetert, et al., 2019)

Ecological dimensions	Physical literacy meanings	Physical literacy actions
Intrapersonal	The IPLA's definition of Physical Literacy, focusing on the individual, highlights the "motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding necessary to value and take responsibility for engaging in physical activities for life," as described by Whitehead. ¹⁷	Actively seek educational opportunities and compelling reasons to try a variety of physical activities at different levels of intensity, aiming to experience enjoyable rewards.
Interpersonal	A range of formal and informal personal relationships that influence physical activity participation.	Enjoy physical activity in pairs or small groups that give opportunities to forge meaningful connections with others.
Organizational	Professional services, resources and services that provide culturally sensitive and relevant opportunities for physical activity engagement.	Select resources and programs that welcome new participants with cultural sensitivity and offer sustained engagement in preferred physical activities and ongoing learning.
Community	Socio-cultural-ecological connections, in terms of the natural and built environments, which can support and sustain physical activity participation.	Create physical activity programming intergenerationally, within neighborhoods and community commons.
Policy	Policy development and implementation for active and healthy aging across government and private organizations.	Advocate and provide opportunities to fundraise for, increase awareness of, and promote, physical activity for personal, social and ecological well-being.

Table 2. Ecological dimensions of physical literacy in action.^{7,31}

with the cultivation of somatic sensibilities in keeping with the Function2Flow model that he and Dr. Rebecca Lloyd developed. Their current SSHRC-funded research project draws upon Smith's experiences in a variety of games and sports, as well as in flow and martial arts. His passion for riding and training horses extends the range of partnered practices for becoming "inter-active for life."

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Resources

Internet

Australian Sports Commission (formerly Sport Australia)
<https://www.ausport.gov.au/>

Canadian Assessment of Physical Literacy (CAPL-2) Training Materials
<https://www.activehealthykids.org/capl-2-training-materials/>

Function2Flow: The InterActive for Life Project
<https://function2flow.ca/the-interactive-for-life-project/>

International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA)
<https://www.physical-literacy.org.uk/>

Passport for Life, a Physical and Health Education Canada project
<https://passportforlife.ca/>

Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE-EPS)
<https://phecanada.ca/>

PLAY (Physical Literacy Assessment for Play) Tools
<https://play.physicalliteracy.ca/play-tools/>

Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE America)
<https://www.shapeamerica.org/>

Sport England
<https://www.sportengland.org/>

Sport for Life
<https://sportforlife.ca/>

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<https://www.unesco.org>

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InterActive for Life partners with ICAA

Drs. Rebecca J. Lloyd and Stephen Smith are working on a multiyear research project with the International Council on Active Aging® called “The InterActive for Life & International Council on Active Aging Partnership Project: A Function2Flow Inquiry into Joyful Programs & Experiences of Active Aging Education.” The project is supported by a grant from Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, a Canadian government funding agency. Visit <https://function2flow.ca/interactive-for-life-ia4l-project-active-aging/> to learn more.

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