

Physical Literacy

Early literacy programs urge parents to introduce their young baby to books and nursery rhymes as a way to prepare for academic learning. But cognitive development is only one factor that contributes to later success and well-being. Recent studies on children's activity levels suggest that we may not be paying enough attention to fostering the early development of physical skills. Lack of "physical literacy" may put children at risk for negative effects that could last their whole lifetime.

Physical literacy

The words "physical literacy" refer to skills that will make it possible for a person to move their body with ease and confidence. These skills are not necessarily innate, but they can be learned starting very early. Their mastery opens up a wide range of physical activities and sports for the person to choose from, contributing to both their health and enjoyment of life.

Benefits

Physical activity helps children grow in many ways. In particular, regular activity leads to improved **strength, endurance, ease of movement, flexibility, coordination** and **balance**. Parents and caregivers also notice that active children often find it easier to **calm themselves**, have **better sleep habits** and have a **better appetite**

Children build their **sense of identity** and their **self-confidence** when they have opportunities to express themselves through movement. They learn to **cooperate** with others when they practise physical activities in a group. Research also indicates that physically active children **perform better in school**. Finally, we know that physical activity promotes both **mental and physical health** and is a key factor in preventing obesity, diabetes, heart disease and many other chronic conditions.

Fundamental skills

Children need to acquire certain **fundamental motor skills** to be able to participate fully in physical activity and organized sports. The most basic skills include being able to **run**; to **throw, catch** and **kick** a ball; to **jump**; to **swim**; to **skate**; and to **ride** a tricycle and later a bicycle. Studies have established a range of ages during which these skills are usually acquired, allowing for individual differences and rates of development. For instance, children normally master running between the ages of two and four. Throwing a ball develops between the ages of two and six. Catching comes later, between the ages of four and six. Of course, children will continue to refine their technique as their strength, balance and coordination increase with age.

Ideally all of the fundamental skills would be developed **by the age of nine**. Children can learn them later, but they will already have missed out on many fun times. If, for instance, they never learned to kick a ball while running, they will not be able to join their friends in a game of soccer at the park. Moreover, because they are "behind" the level of their classmates, they may already have defined themselves as "not good at sports." They may be unwilling to try new skills if they fear being laughed at for being clumsy and awkward.

Studies have shown that children who do not develop good fundamental physical skills when they are young **tend to be less physically active as teens and as adults**. The tendency is for such children to gradually withdraw from physical activity into more sedentary leisure time activities.

Opportunities for practice

Beyond a very basic level of competence, the fundamental skills don't just "naturally" develop on their own. Children need **time to be active** on a regular basis and **safe environments** in which to practise. They also need **willing partners**, both adults and other children, to show them the skills and encourage their efforts. The best time to start is when children are very young.

Experts recommend that **toddlers** have at least 90 minutes a day of active play and **preschoolers** at least two hours. This should include mostly unstructured play, with some time also spent in activities structured by adults. **School-aged children** should aim for 90 minutes of physical activity every day, in the form of free play, games, transportation and recreation.

Unfortunately, **few Canadian children achieve these targets**. For school-aged children and youth, the proportion is only 12 %. Many children spend long hours in vehicles getting to and from school or child care. Once there, they tend to spend much of their time sitting or in quiet activities. This continues at home where many hours may be spent in front of a television or computer screen.

Quiet activities may be easier to supervise and control, but they deprive children of the chance to learn and practise the fundamental skills. Parents and educators must **commit to building physical literacy in the early years** so that children can lay the foundation for a healthy and fulfilling lifestyle.

Written by Betsy Mann with information from Physical and Health Education Canada (www.phecanada.ca) and the Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth (www.activehealthykids.ca). See also the *Moving and Growing* series on activities for children birth to age eight, published by the Canadian Child Care Federation (www.cccf-fcsge.ca).