



Physical Literacy for Communities: A Public Health Approach



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Purpose

This document serves as an exemplary guide for public health professionals to work collaboratively and efficiently within a multi-sector, community-based partnership to address physical literacy. The document provides ways public health can work with other sectors (e.g., education, sport, and recreation) toward building a physically literate community. The document was developed based on Public Health Sudbury & Districts' experience working in partnership with Active Sudbury under the guidance of Sport for Life.

Physical Literacy: What is it exactly?



The International Physical Literacy Association currently defines physical literacy (PL) as *“the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life¹.”*

PL has gained increasing attention in the field of public health as an important determinant of physical activity across the lifespan^{2,3,4}. Also, the Government of Canada’s national policy

document [Common Vision for Increasing Physical Activity and Reducing Sedentary Living in Canada: Let's Get Moving](#) identifies physical literacy as the foundation for an active lifestyle⁵.

Physical Literacy and Health



In Ontario, an estimated \$2.6 billion of the total annual economic burden of chronic disease risk factors can be attributed to physical inactivity⁶. A Statistics Canada health report published in 2022 revealed a decrease in physical activity participation among Canadian youth. In fact, it was stated that youth reported accumulating, on average, two hours less physical activity per week in the fall of 2020 compared with the fall of 2018 (129 minutes per week). A greater decline in Ontario youth was reported with a decrease of 168 minutes per week. The percentage of youth meeting the Canadian physical activity recommendation for children and youth dropped from 50.8% in the fall of 2018 to 37.2% in the fall of 2020⁷.

Individuals who are developing physical literacy have the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engaging in physical activities for life⁸. These skills help them make healthy, active choices⁹. There is a positive association between children with higher physical literacy levels and the likelihood of meeting the [Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines](#)¹⁰. A longitudinal study had also revealed that higher levels of certain physical literacy attributes in childhood—specifically physical competence, motivation, and knowledge—were associated with increased physical activity levels in later years or during adulthood¹¹. There is some evidence speculating that resilience plays a mediating role in linking physical literacy to positive mental health¹². Physical literacy and its domains (affective, cognitive, physical, and behavioural) are also identified as learning

outcomes in [The Ontario Curriculum, Grade 1-8: Health and Physical Education](#), due to its benefits to children’s health and its impact on “healthy development of the whole person” for sustained participation in physical activity throughout their lifespan¹³.

Several national papers including [Health Canada’s Common Vision](#) and the [Framework for Recreation in Canada](#) identified physical literacy as the foundation for an active lifestyle and a life-long journey. Being physically literate results in more opportunities for physical activity¹⁴. In turn, participation in regular physical activity can improve mobility, prolong independent living, and decrease the likelihood of chronic diseases, such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease¹⁵. There is considerable evidence that being physically active lowers the risk of developing cancers of the colon, breast, endometrium, esophagus, stomach, bladder, and kidney¹⁶.

The World Health Organization’s [Global Action Plan on Physical Activity](#) recognizes the importance of strengthening quality physical education and supportive school environments (i.e. more positive experiences and opportunities for active recreation, sports, and play) by applying the principles of the whole-of-school approach in all pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions, to establish enjoyment of, and participation in physical activity, ultimately setting the foundation for health and physical literacy that lead to long-lasting healthy, active lifestyles¹⁷. The [Common Vision](#) also recognizes physical literacy as an essential part of childhood development. Physical activity programs that foster physical literacy provide equitable opportunities for participation regardless of an individual’s socioeconomic status, age, culture, race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, or geographic location¹⁸. Furthermore, Sport for Life has established a [strategy](#) to mobilize equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility goals through the development of physical literacy by way of improving quality sport and physical activity programs¹⁹—all of which is reflected in the *Physical Literacy for Communities* strategy.

In the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action \(2015\)](#), physical activity and sport are identified as tools for social development to improve the health and well-being of individuals and communities. The Call to Action speaks to the need to reduce the barriers to sport participation and promotion of physical activity policies that are inclusive and favourable for the pursuit of sport participation of Indigenous people²⁰. The [Sport for Life Indigenous Communities: Active for Life](#) is a resource created collaboratively by Sport for Life and the Aboriginal Sport Circle. The resource builds on concepts of physical literacy that seek to engage Indigenous community members, including parents, Elders, educators, recreation leaders, and coaches, who prioritize physical activity as a means to foster holistic growth and community well-being.

Physical activity is a modifiable risk factor and can also prevent and reduce the burden of mental illness and injuries^{21,22,23}. The *Icelandic Model for Primary Prevention of Substance Use (IPM)* hypothesizes that risky behaviour is an outcome of a “*lack of opportunities for participation in positive and prosocial development (e.g., organized recreational and extracurricular activities such as sports, music, drama, after-school clubs, etc.)*”²⁴.” among other sociological factors. Therefore, increased opportunities for physical activity may act as a protective factor against substance use in youth. Since the implementation of the IPM many municipalities have increased their funding for recreational and extracurricular activities to encourage prosocial behaviours in youth²⁵.



Physical Literacy for Communities



Physical Literacy for Communities (PL4C) is a strategy created by Sport for Life. PL4C seeks to establish a multi-sector community-based partnership to support the development of physical literacy (PL) and increase physical activity in communities²⁶. The purpose of the partnership is mainly to create or enhance collaboration between sectors that champion physical activity^{27,28}. The partnership seeks to build local capacity to support the delivery of community PL-enriched programs. Key components of building capacity include providing training, resources, and increasing collaboration between various sectors.

In October 2022, the Board of Health for Public Health Sudbury & Districts approved the Motion #29-22 outlining the importance of *Physical Literacy for Healthy Active Children*²⁹ and expressing the need for local quality PL-enriched programs for children and youth. The motion recognizes physical literacy as the foundation to an active lifestyle and recommended that local sport and recreation organizations, education, and early learning settings work collaboratively with Active Sudbury, including Public Health Sudbury & Districts with the guidance of Sport for Life. We hope this document encourages other communities to begin or continue their journey in becoming a physically literate community.

Physical Literacy for Communities as a Public Health Intervention

In 2018, Sport for Life published a document titled: [Developing Physical Literacy - Building a New Normal for all Canadians](#). The document serves as a rationale and roadmap that targets the sectors, which play a key role in creating physical activity opportunities in communities and speaks to the need for a collective approach³⁰.

Several studies show that physical literacy sets the foundation for physical activity participation throughout life. Researchers suggest that physical literacy could be seen as a determinant of health due to its demonstrated impact in increasing physical activity for life and the relationship between life-long physical activity engagement and chronic disease prevention, mental health, psychosocial well-being, and overall health status^{31,32}.

Physical literacy—more specifically referring to its multiple core domains (affective, cognitive, physical, and behavioural)—is a concept that captures broader social processes that contribute to life-long learning. Therefore, positioning physical literacy as a strategy within a comprehensive health promotion approach by way of inter-sectoral collaborations, for example, between physical education, health promotion and public health should be considered³³.

The [Ontario Public Health Standards](#) are comprised of foundational standards and program standards (e.g., *Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being, School Health*). The foundational standards advise on specific requirements that support all program standards. These foundational standards include but are not limited to: *Population Health Assessment, Health Equity and Effective Public Health Practice*. The *Chronic Disease*

“Positioning physical literacy within the narrative of health promotion and disease prevention provides opportunities, at conceptual and practice levels, to build inter-sectoral collaborations between physical education, health promotion and public health³³.”

Prevention and Well-Being standard requires that: “community partners have the knowledge of and increased capacity to act on the factors associated with the prevention of chronic diseases and promotion of wellbeing, including healthy living behaviours, healthy public policy, and creating supportive environments³⁴.” This includes knowledge of the importance and impact of physical literacy on increasing physical activity participation and of reducing the risk of chronic disease.

Foundational Standards: Population Health Assessment

Population Health Assessment measures, monitors, analyzes, and interprets population health data to identify challenges and opportunities to improve the health outcomes for individuals and populations; including non-communicable and infectious diseases and broader system and social determinants of health³⁵. Physical literacy sets the foundation to physical activity on an individual level and therefore needs to be measured at an individual level.

Several validated tools have been developed to measure an individual's physical literacy including the [Physical Literacy Assessment for Youth tools](#), [The Canadian Physical Literacy Assessment](#), [Passport for Life](#), and the [Physical Literacy Observation Tool](#). For example, the *Physical Literacy Assessment for Youth PLAYFun* assesses 18 different fundamental movement skills; the *Physical Literacy Assessment for Youth's PLAYSelf* is a self-evaluation form that assesses an individual's perception of their physical literacy³⁶.

Using a combination of physical literacy assessment tools may provide a collective representation of physical literacy at a local population level. The information could be used to guide and observe trends and to support further local investigation in order to provide effective public health interventions.

Foundational Standards: Health Equity

Health is influenced by a broad range of factors (e.g., lifestyle and behaviours, genetics, physical, social, and economic environments)³⁷. Organizations (e.g., sports and recreation organizations, educational institutions, health services) that have adopted the principles of physical literacy within their programs and services seek to provide inclusive environments, increase access, and work towards reducing barriers to physical activity participation^{38,39,40}. Inclusive physical activity programs that are offered by coaches, recreation providers, and educators, collectively contribute to reducing health inequities.

Foundational Standards: Effective Public Health Practice

Guided by current and emerging evidence, as well as a health equity approach, effective public health practice is an ongoing and iterative cycle of program development and improvement. It uses data from population health assessments, as well as evidence from research and

evaluation to best inform decision-making and program planning in local, regional, provincial, national, and international environments⁴¹.

The Physical Literacy for Communities (PL4C) strategy should be explored as an effective public health practice. The Public Health Agency of Canada has partnered with Sport for Life to support several community-led endeavours across the country⁴². Creating a multi-sector, community-based partnership can improve communications between all sectors. Collaborating and championing the adoption of physical literacy programs and services can influence the quality of opportunities within the community. The various sectors offer unique expertise and values that contribute quality PL programming for community members.

As a key partner in the improvement of population health and health outcomes, local public health should actively participate in communities where the PL4C strategy is being implemented or considered.

As outlined above, physical activity is a well-recognized protective factor against many chronic diseases including poor mental health, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and hypertension. Individuals or populations that are physically literate are more likely to have higher physical activity levels throughout their lifespan, thereby reducing their risk of developing a chronic disease.

Public health agencies have a clear mandate to *“develop and implement a program of public health interventions using a comprehensive health promotion approach that addresses chronic disease risk and protective factors to reduce the burden of illness from chronic diseases in the health unit population⁴³.”* Creating physically literate communities through PL programming shows great promise as a health promotion and public health intervention.

Below are recommendations that public health agencies can implement to support a multi-sector strategy that builds a more physically literate community.

Recommendations for Public Health

Collaborating with the Early Years Sector



- > Support the enhancement of indoor and outdoor spaces that encourage inclusive play. For example, spaces should be suitable for all forms of structured and unstructured play and support all abilities, including active risky play and play-based learning.
- > Work with early learning settings by collaborating and supporting professional development opportunities so that early childhood educators are trained in physical literacy.
- > Work with early learning settings to develop policies and guidelines that foster physical literacy development of children and youth (e.g., policies that encourage curious play, play-based learning, and risky play).
- > Share new and current best practices with early learning settings that have committed to fostering the development of physical literacy.

Collaborating with the Education Sector

- > Support the enhancement of indoor and outdoor spaces that encourage inclusive play and the development of fundamental movement skills.
- > Support educators and schools in providing physical literacy-enriched lesson plans and athletic programming (e.g., intramural games, extracurricular activities) and promote movement over the whole school day.
- > Work with local school boards by supporting physical literacy professional development opportunities for educators.
- > Work with local school boards and schools to develop policies and guidelines that foster physical literacy development in children and youth (e.g., policies that encourage movement and reduce the impact of sedentary behaviours and the use of screens in classrooms).
- > Share new and current best practices with local school boards that have committed to foster the development of physical literacy. For example, provide training on physical literacy assessment tools (i.e., PLAY Tools) to help schools assess children's fundamental movement skills and chart their progress.

Collaborating with the Sport and Recreation Sector



- > Work with community groups including committees and associations to ensure that places where everyone can be active—trails, gymnasiums, multi-purpose spaces, pools, and rinks—are accessible to participants of all abilities (including providing clear navigation through signage and informed staff). Make access affordable, barrier-free, and safe to support individuals needs (e.g., gender, cultural) so that all users have an enjoyable and safe experience.
- > Support municipal recreation departments and sport organizations to enhance spaces that will foster physical literacy programs. For example, the facility’s equipment is modified for the ability, size, and fundamental movement stages of participants.
- > Consult with sport and recreation organizations to include physical literacy within their programming to align with the [Long-term Development in Sport and Physical Activity Framework](#) and ensure that programs and environments are fun and developmentally appropriate.

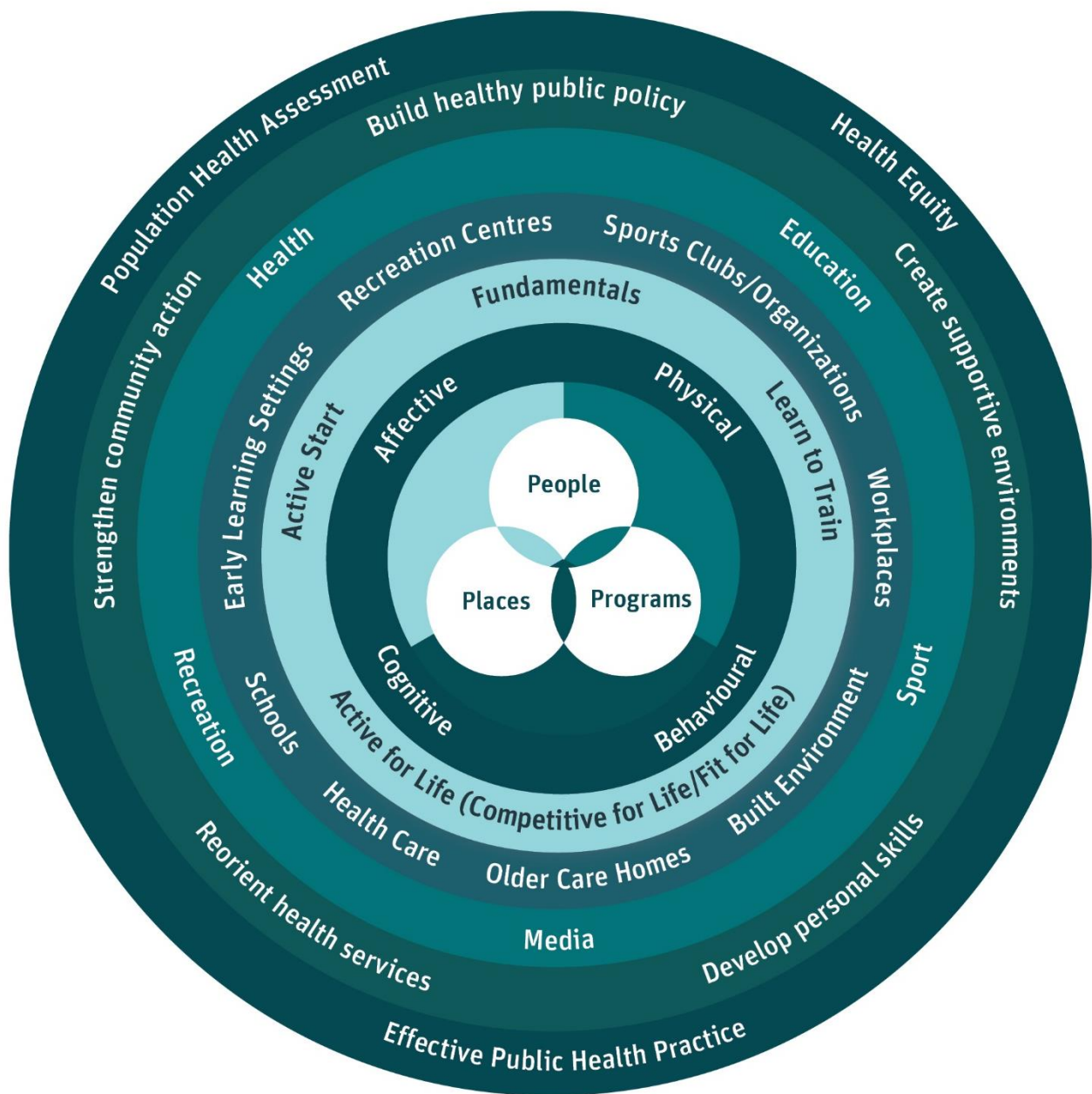
- > Consult with recreation providers to focus on multisport programs, rather than specializing in one activity or sport, and design activities to maximize the use of skills in small-sided games (i.e., small group circuit style activities) and other activities.
- > Support sport organizations to avoid early specialization. Share information on the use of warm-up and cool-down periods to develop a wide range of fundamental movement skills.
- > Share new and current best practices with recreation and sport organizations that have committed to fostering the development of physical literacy. Focus on the development of fundamental movement skills prior to introducing fundamental sport skills to ensure that every participant has a quality-first experience and sense of belonging.
- > Encourage recreation and sport organizations to work towards ensuring that their programs are inclusive (support diversity, provide equitable opportunities, and conducive of social norms¹ that reinforce more positive movement behaviour).
- > Support recreation and sport organizations to enhance their policies and guidelines (e.g., concussion protocols, guidelines pertaining to making access affordable and barrier free).
- > Work in partnership to offer physical literacy training to recreation leaders, coaches, and administrators.

These recommendations are a sampling of the ways public health agencies can work in partnership with each sector. The following framework was developed to show how we at public health can collaboratively support physical literacy for communities using an ecological model.

¹ For more information on social norms pertaining to physical activity, please consult the document titled [A Common Vision for Increasing Physical Activity and Reducing Sedentary Living in Canada](#) located on page 29.

Pulling It All Together

Figure 1. Physical Literacy for Communities: A Public Health Approach



This approach provides a visual of how a strategy of physical literacy for communities can be utilized within a public health context. It provides an overview of the role public health agencies can take while working collaboratively with other sectors to support the development of a more physically literate community. The approach includes Sport for Life’s concepts and

recommended practices that are integral to the development of a more physically literate community. The circular design illustrates how all components work together simultaneously to ensure its effectiveness.

The core of this approach emphasizes people, programs, and places. Each sector has their own unique way of providing programming and services. It is important that each sector incorporates physical literacy within and works collaboratively with the other sectors including public health.

The first layer speaks to delivering physical literacy-enriched programs and services by trained physical literacy champions (e.g., teachers, coaches, early childhood educators) in environments (e.g., schools, sport facilities, early learning settings) that are conducive to the development of physical literacy by participants. The people, places, and programs should foster motivation and support participant confidence (affective domain illustrated in the figure) while increasing their physical competence (physical domain illustrated in the figure) and providing them with the ability to understand, value (cognitive domain illustrated in the figure), and take responsibility for their own active health (behavioural domain illustrated in the figure).

The second layer shows how—collectively—all sectors can collaborate to enhance or develop policies, create supportive physical literacy-enriched environments, have staff and volunteers trained in physical literacy, and provide opportunity to exchange knowledge and resources.

The third layer speaks to the [Long-term Development Stages in Sport and Physical Activity Framework](#). While physical literacy is vital during the early stages of life, it can, and should be, developed throughout one's lifespan. Physical literacy is a lifelong journey that keeps an individual engaged in different forms of movement in ways they enjoy.

The fourth and fifth layers demonstrate all aspects that need to be considered to enhance physical activity opportunities in a community. It shows all sectors and places where individuals can be physically active. Physical literacy and its benefits on the health of communities depend on a coordinated effort by all sectors and more specifically all organizations including the agencies and institutions that can influence an individual's physical literacy journey.

The sixth and seventh layers reveal the foundation of quality physical literacy programming and services. Quality physical literacy programming includes developing personal skills (e.g. providing training on physical literacy), building supportive environments (e.g. whole-school approach), strengthening community actions (e.g. participating on local physical literacy alliances or committees), building healthy public policies (e.g. a sport club's commitment to implement physical literacy), and reorienting health services (e.g. inclusive; focused on the individual as a whole person).

Through population health assessments, health equity, and effective public health practice, local public health professionals can work efficiently and effectively with all sectors to ensure individuals experience a physical literacy journey that is meaningful and leads to being active for life.

Example of Physical Literacy for Communities – Active Sudbury

When different sectors work collaboratively and increase knowledge exchange, communities have a greater influence over their ability to increase physical activity participation. This is why a small group of local physical activity champions came together and started the journey of what is now known as Active Sudbury.

Active Sudbury is a community group comprised of individuals who work in health, recreation, sport, and education within the City of Greater Sudbury. The leadership team consists of physical literacy champions from Cambrian College, City of Greater Sudbury, Collège Boréal, Laurentian University, Public Health Sudbury & Districts, SportLink, and The Baseball Academy.

Members of the leadership team coordinate and provide education, raise awareness, and assist in developing supportive environments through PLAY groups (Physical Literacy and You). These PLAY groups are structured as different communities of practice that focus on physical literacy in the early years, education, sport and recreation, and health—all of which have their own unique way of communicating and sharing knowledge and experiences.

Established in 2016, Active Sudbury began its collaborative work with the support of a RBC Learn to Play grant. In 2017, the project received a three-year Ontario Trillium Foundation Grow Grant. These funding opportunities were instrumental in increasing awareness and skill-building opportunities such as workshops, conferences, and community of practice tables. Since the establishment of Active Sudbury, over 2000 physical literacy champions have participated in a variety of learning opportunities.

Conclusion



As we look ahead, it is vital that physical literacy-enriched programs and services be delivered to address an increase in sedentary behaviours and chronic diseases associated with physical inactivity in our communities. The well-being of the population is influenced across all sectors—in education, early years, sport, and recreation. Aspiring to a *Health in All Policies*⁴⁴ approach across all sectors, public health can collaborate with and assist decision-makers in education, early years, sport, and recreation sectors to incorporate health and equity principles into their policy development process to ensure the long-term health and well-being of the community. A multi-sector community-based partnership is a systemic and upstream approach that accounts for the health implications of decisions, to improve population health and health equity. The collaborative work—both ongoing and completed—by Active Sudbury has shown positive strides towards building a more physically literate community for us, and future generations.

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