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Understanding Physical Literacy



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Introduction

This Information Booklet aims to support the implementation of the All-Island Physical Literacy Consensus Statement (2022). The purpose of this Consensus Statement is to:

- Provide an all-island definition for physical literacy
- Facilitate a consistent understanding of physical literacy
- Advocate the integration of the definition into policy, practice and research
- Encourage collaboration within and between key organisations and sectors to ensure the strategic development of physical literacy
- Promote a culture of lifelong participation in physical activity for all



This booklet supports the Consensus Statement by providing answers to 10 common questions about physical literacy.



How has physical literacy been defined?



As physical literacy is an evolving and debated concept, many definitions have been created by different sectors and countries.

Nationally, the official definition is the one contained in the [All-Island Physical Literacy Consensus Statement](#) (2022) which is a multi-sectoral policy co-ordinated by Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland to promote all-island endorsement of a common definition for physical literacy.

ALL-ISLAND PHYSICAL LITERACY DEFINITION

Physical literacy is the **motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge** and **understanding** that enables a person to value and participate in physical activity throughout life.

Therefore, this definition will be used to explain the concept of physical literacy in more detail.



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What are the domains of physical literacy?



The All-Island definition of physical literacy entails the development of 3 learning domains, i.e., categories of learning.



Cognitive Domain

The cognitive domain is the “thinking” aspect of physical literacy and is denoted by **knowledge** and **understanding** in the definition.



Affective Domain

The affective domain is the “feeling” aspect of physical literacy and is denoted by **motivation** and **confidence** in the definition.



Physical Domain

The physical domain is the “doing” aspect of physical literacy and is denoted by **physical competence** in the definition.

As all 3 domains are involved, **1 of the 7 Guiding Principles (number 1)** for the All-Island definition of physical literacy is that it **contributes to the holistic development of the person**, i.e., the whole person which includes their thoughts (**cognitive**), feelings (**affective**) and movements (**physical**).

This Guiding Principle is an important reminder that physical literacy is concerned with person development rather than player or athlete development - players and athletes may emerge but that is not the objective or priority of physical literacy.



What is the relationship between the domains of physical literacy?



The relationship between the domains is complex and ever-changing as it is dependent on multiple variables such as the individual, activity, environment and/or phase of life, therefore the relationship is difficult if not impossible to define.

However, as physical literacy develops the whole person, all 3 domains are regarded as:

Essential

- All domains are essential to realise progress – all 3 domains must be progressed
- If any 1 of the 3 domains is not being fostered then physical literacy is not being developed

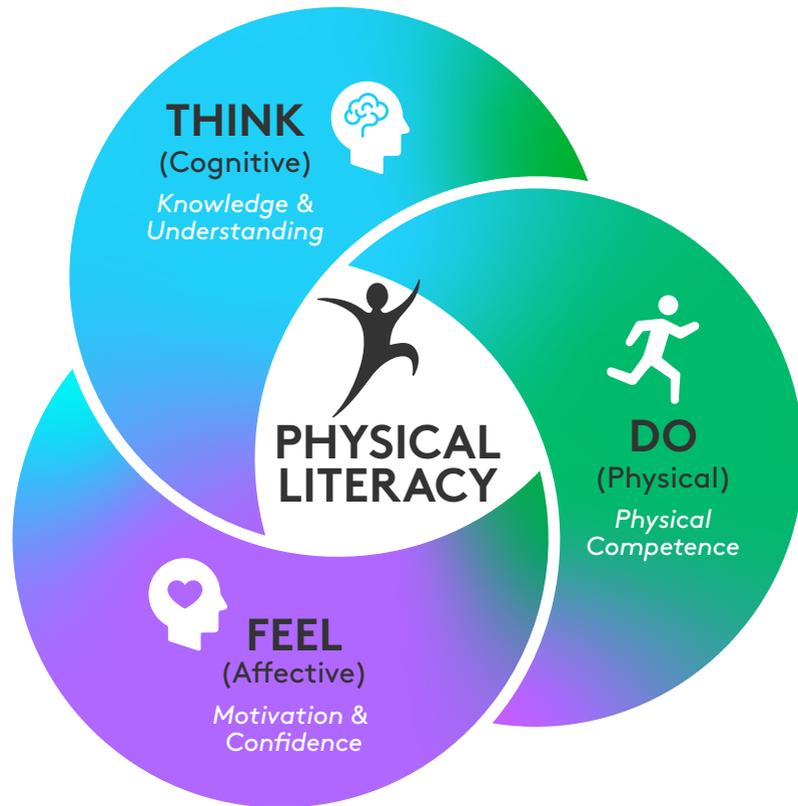
Interdependent

- Physical literacy is founded on the belief that the body and mind are inseparable – the mind is in the body
- Accordingly, the 3 domains are interdependent although how they are connected and the exact levels of interdependence between the domains is indeterminable as likely to change depending on the individual, activity and/or environment, as well as throughout life

Equal

- All 3 domains are equal but their relative importance may also change depending on the individual, activity and/or environment, as well as throughout life
- Despite theoretical assertions that all domains are essential, interdependent and equal, in practice more importance and attention is placed on physical competence
- Undoubtedly, physical development is critical but remember it is only 1 of 3 essential, interdependent and equal domains

Relationship between three domains of Physical Literacy



There are many emerging and challenging questions about the relationship to be explored and answered as there are inconsistencies and contradictions.

For example, a person **knowing and understanding** the correct technique for a foot dribble does not guarantee they will demonstrate **motivation, confidence** and **physical competence** when performing it.



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Why is physical literacy important?



PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

- Physical literacy is important because it is both a **gateway** to and an **outcome** of **lifelong** participation in physical activity
- Physical literacy is essential as it can **increase, sustain** and **enhance** participation and performance in various forms of physical activity including active play, dance, sport (recreational and competitive), fitness training and active travel

HEALTH BENEFITS

- Regular participation in physical activity is encouraged because of its **health-enhancing** effects, for example, it improves overall wellbeing via significant health benefits for the:
 - **Heart:** reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety
 - **Body:** contributes to preventing and managing non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer
 - **Mind:** enhances thinking, learning and judgement skills¹

PHYSICAL LITERACY & PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

- Physical literacy plays a key role in influencing choices to participate in physical activity
- A person who is developing their physical literacy **knows** and **understands** movement and is **motivated, confident** and **physically competent** when moving so they are more likely to choose an active lifestyle whereas a person who has under-developed physical literacy may choose an inactive lifestyle

- Physical literacy provides the **foundations** and **pathway** for lifelong participation in physical activity which is associated with numerous life-enhancing health benefits
- As being physically active throughout life can enrich a person's quality of life, cultures should be created wherein lifelong physical literacy and physical activity for all are valued and promoted to ensure each person has the opportunity to benefit from a longer and better quality of life
- This ethos is reflected in one of the **Guiding Principles (number 7)** which states that physical literacy *flourishes in cultures that value and promote physical activity*

ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

- Being more physically active can also contribute toward sustainable development goals by minimising environmental impact and promoting respectful engagement with the outdoors as illustrated by the following 2 examples:
 - **Active travel** - encouraging active travel, e.g. changing from car use to self-powered forms of travelling, such as walking, cycling, scooting and rollerblading, contributes to a reduction in emissions and improved air quality, thereby reducing the numbers of deaths and illnesses from air pollution
 - **Active outdoor natural spaces** - facilitating physical activity in outdoor natural spaces in urban and rural locations, e.g., city parks, forests and lakes, can foster appreciation and protection for these spaces, generate more demand for similar spaces, optimise preservation of natural habitats and minimise the loss of biodiversity²

¹ World Health Organization 2022. [Physical Activity](#).
² World Health Organization 2018. [Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030](#).



5

Can a person be described as 'physically literate'?



A person can be described as 'physically literate' but the term should not be used to imply an individual has reached an ideal and/or end 'state' or destination in which they have attained all physical literacy skills. This is because this interpretation is contrary to the **Guiding Principle (number 3)** that physical literacy *entails a unique lifelong journey for each person*.

It may be appropriate if 'physically literate' is used in the same way that the word 'literate' is used in relation to proficiency in the English language as normally when a person is described as 'literate' it is not suggested that they know and understand every single word in the English dictionary.

Physical literacy should be developed throughout the life course, i.e., from birth until the end of life.

Physical literacy is not restricted to infancy and childhood, however these phases are critical for establishing a strong foundation for the development of physical literacy.³

Ideally the physical literacy journey is **continuous throughout life**, however progress may fluctuate over the life span.

As advised by Professor Margaret Whitehead, many journeys feature 'twists and turns ... and maybe setbacks ... However, with determination, individuals can re-start and indeed flourish'.⁴

³ Whitehouse & Murdoch 2006. [Physical literacy and physical education: conceptual mapping](#).

⁴ Whitehead 2010. [Physical literacy throughout the life course](#).



Can physical literacy be assessed?



Physical literacy can be assessed but in accordance with the idea of a physical literacy journey which is unique and continuous, it is preferable to refer to **charting progress** rather than assessment, measurement or evaluation.

The table below shows there are 3 benchmarks or reference systems.⁵

	Criterion-Reference	Norm-Reference	Ipsative-Reference *
Comparison	Predetermined standard e.g. curriculum	Others' performances e.g. ranking within a group	Own previous performance
Approach	Activity-centred	Group-centred	Person-centred

The preferred benchmark or reference against which any change in progress is charted is the person's own previous performance (**ipsative-referenced and person-centred approach**) and not against a predetermined standard (criterion-referenced and activity-centred approach) or the performance of others (norm-reference and group-centred approach).

Encouraging **participation** rather than performance, focusing on **personal progress** rather than competition, and equating success with **personal achievement** rather than winning over others, can positively affect a person's physical literacy journey.

It is essential that progress in all **3 domains** (**cognitive**, **affective** and **physical**) is charted i.e., check for personal improvement in **knowledge, understanding, motivation, confidence** and **physical competence**.

⁵ Grout & Long 2009. Improving teaching and learning in physical education.



How can physical literacy be developed?



As physical literacy is both a **gateway** to and an **outcome** of physical activity, everyone should be provided with and avail of various opportunities to be physically active so that they can develop their physical literacy.

Physical literacy needs to be **proactively** developed through a range of physical activities as it cannot be assumed it will occur naturally as part of normal growth.

5 components of physical literacy (**knowledge, understanding, motivation, confidence** and **physical competence**) in all movement patterns and skills, it is critical that a broad and balanced range of physical activities is provided.

This is especially relevant to those who **specialise** early in specific activities, e.g., if a child or young person only develops **knowledge, understanding, motivation, confidence** and **physical competence** in a small number of movement skills associated with one sport or form of physical activity, they may be less likely to participate in or transfer into other sport and/or forms of physical activities in the present and in the future.

It is vital that physically active experiences are:

- **Person-centred** – activities should focus on the individual’s needs and expectations rather than the instructor’s or organisation’s objectives.
- **Meaningful** – experiences should be relevant and important to the person so that they are valued and prioritised.
- **Positive** – activities should be enjoyable, motivational, gratifying and celebrate personal progress.
 - This is another **Guiding Principle (number 4)**, namely that physical literacy **develops through positive movement experiences in a variety of settings and environments**
 - This does not mean that experiences should not be challenging as this can be patronising and result in disengagement
 - It is important that activities are progressive, stimulating and allow individuals to experience a sense of mastery, personal achievement and success



The omission of the word ‘inclusive’ from this list above is intentional as physical literacy is inherently inclusive.

- As per **Guiding Principle (number 2)**, physical literacy is **an inclusive concept which should be accessible to all**
- Everything considered so far, e.g., the definition, 3 domains, physical literacy journey and charting progress, all apply equally to everyone irrespective of their age, sex, gender, sexual identity, ability, culture, religion, language, socioeconomic background, etc.
- Accordingly, activities should be accessible, welcoming, accommodate everyone’s requirements and reflect the diversity of contemporary society as this will help all individuals develop a sense of belonging



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Where can physical literacy be developed?



The various opportunities to be physically active should also be in different settings and environments.

Settings include where people live, work, study and play.

Environments include **indoor**, **virtual** and **outdoor**.

All of these options are beneficial as they provide more choice and flexibility for individuals to be active.

Being active in the outdoors could be encouraged more so that individuals can avail of the additional benefits associated with being in natural surroundings.

These environments can be sub-divided into 4 categories⁶:

- On the **ground** – most games, sport, dance and physical activities
- In and on the **water** – all aquatic activities
- On **snow and ice** – all winter sliding activities
- In the **air** – gymnastics, diving and other aerial activities

Developing physical literacy in all of these 4 categories is encouraged.

⁶ Canadian Sport for Life 2016. [Developing physical literacy.](#)



Who is responsible for developing physical literacy?



Ideally, every individual should take **personal responsibility** for developing their physical literacy.

However, as the development of physical literacy is not confined to one setting or environment and because physical literacy journeys feature twists, turns, setback and re-starts (Whitehead 2010), it is likely that many individuals and organisations will be involved in **helping others** acquire their sense of personal responsibility.

This approach is reflected in the **Guiding Principle (number 5)** which advises that physical literacy *is a shared responsibility by individuals and society*.

Consequently, another one of the **Guiding Principles (number 6)** is that physical literacy *is influenced by positive social support*.

Every person's physical literacy journey can be enriched by positive social support, especially for those who face challenges with continuing their physical literacy journey.

For example, in relation to children, significant others that provide social support could include:

- Parents/guardians and other family members
- Peers and friends
- Early Childhood Educators
- Teachers and teaching assistants
- Health, leisure industry and childcare professionals
- Coaches from national governing bodies of sport
- Instructors/leaders from outdoor education and uniformed organisations

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What are the guiding principles of physical literacy?



The definition of physical literacy in the All-Island Physical Literacy Consensus Statement (2022) is founded on **7 Guiding Principles**.

Physical Literacy:

1. Contributes to the holistic development of the person
2. Is an inclusive concept which should be accessible to all
3. Entails a unique lifelong journey for each person
4. Develops through positive movement experiences in a variety of settings and environments
5. Is a shared responsibility by individuals and society
6. Is influenced by positive social support
7. Flourishes in cultures that value and promote physical activity

Endorsement of these principles provides the foundation for the creation of a culture wherein lifelong physical literacy and physical activity for all are valued and promoted, and in which each person has the opportunity to benefit from a better quality of life.





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