



**Cymru**  
National Day Nurseries Association

# Factsheet

## Physical literacy in the early years

Curriculum for Wales

# Physical literacy in the early years

*“Children need opportunities to develop a wide range of fundamental movement skills, which are the basis for moving with competence and confidence in everyday life. It is essential for us to lay the foundations of physical literacy in the early years through modelling positive attitudes towards movement and providing an environment that gives children the opportunity to explore, practise and consolidate a wide range of physical movements in a variety of contexts.”*

Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery setting, the Welsh Government

## What is physical literacy?

People often hear the ‘literacy’ part of ‘physical literacy’ and find it confusing. The word ‘literacy’ is most often associated with language and communication, especially within education. But literacy has another definition – literacy is competence or knowledge in a specified area. You can expand ‘computer literacy’ by increasing competence in using computers and related technologies, you can enhance ‘financial literacy’ by increasing knowledge and skills related to managing finances and you can nurture ‘physical literacy’ by increasing physical competence, knowledge and understanding.

You may come across some variation in searching for the definition of physical literacy, but one of the most widely accepted and comprehensive is:

*“Physical literacy can be described as the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life.”*

Whitehead, M. 2016.

This definition not only focuses on the competence and knowledge, but also the motivation, and attitudes needed to be physically literate and promote enjoyment and engagement in physical activity.

## How is physical literacy different from physical development?

Physical literacy and physical development are related but there are some clear distinctions.

Physical development is the growth and development of the body and the physiological processes that enable physical movement. Physical development involves the development of strength, flexibility, endurance, coordination and overall fitness. Supporting physical development helps the body grow and mature in a healthy way.

Physical literacy is much broader, and includes cognitive and emotional aspects of movement, aiming to make individuals confident and motivated to stay physically active. Physical literacy is not only developing physical skills but also the knowledge of how to move effectively, the motivation to be active, and the confidence to participate in various physical activities. It involves mental and

emotional elements as well as physical aspects. The aim for developing physical literacy is to enjoy movement, be motivated to engage, understand the benefits of and foster lifelong participation in physical activity and sports throughout life, regardless of skill level.

Physical literacy builds on physical development but also adds layers of emotional, cognitive, and social development.

### Why is developing children's physical literacy important in the early years?

Physical activity has multiple benefits for children. Movement is linked to cognition and learning, and engaging in physical activity can enhance children's sense of belonging and well-being. It can support greater levels of concentration, motivation and memory, as well as support healthy bone and muscle development. For children aged 3 and 4, not being active enough is associated with poor health and can have negative developmental implications both mentally and physically.

In Wales, the focus on learning through play aims for children to have lots of opportunities to be physically active in their learning. However, there are a range of physical skills that children are developing, where adult-led interactions, modelling and scaffolding is required. That is where the role of the enabling adult is extremely important.

If children are very physically active in the early years, they are more likely to be physically active as they grow. The engagement of children in the early years in developing their physical literacy skills is essential for equipping them to live healthier lives as they grow and enabling them to make informed choices about how they engage in physical activity and care for their bodies.

*"Take care of your body. It's the only place you have to live"*

Jim Rohn, motivational speaker.

### Developing children's physical literacy

It's important to understand your current position within your practice and provision. Ensure you have a strong knowledge and understanding of the body, growth and physical development, to provide developmentally appropriate practices and provisions for children.

It's suggested to set aside some time to observe children within the setting to take **notice** of the following for example:

- How much time children are engaged in physically active play throughout the day?
- How much play is through sedentary experiences or opportunities?
- Who is playing where? How much time do they spend there?
- How do your environments encourage movement or play in ways other than sitting?



**Analyse** what you have learned from your observations:

- Are certain groups of children or individuals more active than others? Why do you think this is?
- Do some children require prompts to engage in physical play?
- How do your environments allow for children to explore their body and its capabilities? E.g. mirrors to look at own reflection, range of terrain, risky play opportunities, shadow screens.

**Respond** by using this information to inform your current and future planning for engaging experiences and effective environments and your involvement as enabling adults:

- Enabling adults:
  - Model positive dispositions towards physical movement
  - Talk positively about the body and how to look after it. Discuss how different things work in different ways e.g. doing yoga makes your body feel better and less achy. Eating breakfast in the morning gives you energy. Star jumps help when you're excited about something. Games are fun to play with friend
  - Be mindful not to engage in gender stereotyping e.g. sports are for boys, girls do not like mud and climbing etc.
  - Be mindful not to promote disordered eating or body dysmorphia (e.g. I have done lots of running today, so I have earned this cake.) and ensure you explore a range of bodies within your resources
  - Provide time, space and opportunity for children to develop their physical literacy.
- Effective environments:
  - Are there ways to encourage more movement and active play? E.g. can you develop chair free spaces? Can children paint on the floor as well as tables/easels? Can you provide dedicated spaces for big movements (loose parts play, vehicles, den building etc.)? Is the tap a short or long distance from the area where it may be required? Can you encourage learning opportunities which require extra movement
  - Are there local community spaces that you can make the most of? Allocate time each week to spend in a natural open area (e.g. woodland, park, beach).
- Engaging experiences:
  - Consider experiences that offer opportunities for children to engage in big physical play. E.g. gardening, climbing, yoga, sports (ball/bat sports, target sports, team sports)
  - Offer opportunities to be physically active outdoors and indoors
  - Offer opportunities for children to experience a range of play types e.g. rough and tumble, exploratory and risky play

- Consider creative experiences that include physical play. e.g. music, dance, songs/rhymes, drama/stories
- Reflect on the physical opportunities that cannot be met within your environment alone and require focused planning and delivery.

### Further resources and support:

A range of support providing information on physical literacy and practical ideas to support its development in practice.

- Sport Wales Physical Literacy - [www.sport.wales/content-vault/physical-literacy/](http://www.sport.wales/content-vault/physical-literacy/)
- Wales Academy for Health and Physical Literacy - [www.uwtsd.ac.uk/wahpl](http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/wahpl)
- Youth Sport Trusts' Early Years Physical Literacy Framework - <https://bit.ly/EYPLF>
- Early Years Physical Literacy - [www.earlyyearsphysicalliteracy.com/](http://www.earlyyearsphysicalliteracy.com/)
- Physical Activity in the Early Years (online course) - <https://ndna.org.uk/EYPhysicalActivity>
- Physical activity and nutrition in nurseries: PANCo training and Start Life Well - <https://ndna.org.uk/PANCo>



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for early years

# Factsheet

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