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**Functional Physical Literacy for Child and Youth Recreation Programming:  
A Community Response to the 2015 Canadian Recreation Framework**

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**Abstract**

The recreation sector is perfectly suited to specifically address issues surrounding the desire to be physically active. This is because of recreation's connection to the community, the broad spectrum of its consumers and its ability to address the positive health outcomes of an active lifestyle as it relates to the physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains of wellbeing. To do so appropriately, a guiding framework is necessary; however, one does not currently exist for the recreation sector. As such, we are creating a multi-layered functional physical literacy (FPL) framework to suit the needs of recreation programmers, instructors and parents, to ensure the delivery of high quality programs that are developmentally appropriate. The FPL framework is intended to be a catalyst for any recreation service provider wanting to build an evidence-based physical activity (PA) program with a developmentally appropriate scope and sequence. The FPL framework will complement existing provincial education and sport curricula so that recreation programming supports what children learn in these areas. This recreation-centered contribution will maximize the reach of PL education for the purpose of increasing PA. The FPL framework will be designed for parents and recreation leaders who play a role in helping children and youth lead active lifestyles outside of school and organized sport settings.

**Keywords:** physical literacy, recreation, child, youth, framework

## **Functional Physical Literacy for Child and Youth Recreation Programming: A Community Response to the 2015 Canadian Recreation Framework**

### **Introduction**

The Pathway to Wellbeing is a broad framework proposed by the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA), which provides a foundation for reflection, discussion and the development of actionable plans by all stakeholders in the recreation sector (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 2015). It also supports the rationale for contributing to an evolving recreation strategy, and describes the importance of multi sector collaboration (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 2015). The framework is a coast-to-coast shared initiative by provincial and territorial governments who have set the stage for Canadians to engage in local solutions to the national challenge of re-visioning recreation's capacity for achieving wellbeing through reversing the trend of physical inactivity. Leaders and practitioners in the recreation sector can (and must) do more to ensure that this call to action comes to life in meaningful and unique ways in communities across Canada.

A leader in the recreation sector's movement toward a collaborative, community response to improved wellbeing is Vivo for Healthier Generations. Vivo is a community-driven charity housed in a regional recreation centre in north central Calgary (Alberta, Canada) that has aligned its mission to take action in response to the Canadian Recreation Framework (CRF). It is governed by an independent, volunteer, community-based Board of Directors, which provides oversight and strategic direction for the charitable society. Vivo's mission is to raise healthier generations by bringing leadership and innovation to the grassroots of the recreation sector. Vivo embraces the Active Canada 20/20 guiding principle of building capacity in research, practice, policy, and evaluation by becoming a social enterprise that is committed to providing healthy living leadership based on evidence, shifting the attitudes and behaviours of citizens, and creating a new model for Canada's recreation sector (Active Canada 20/20, 2012). Vivo intends to do its part by representing the citizens of its broad community in a national collective effort to improve the health of Canadians.

The CRF presents an opportunity to shape new strategies and relationships that will ensure recreation's continued relevance and leadership in the journey to wellbeing (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 2015). The collective impact of multiple

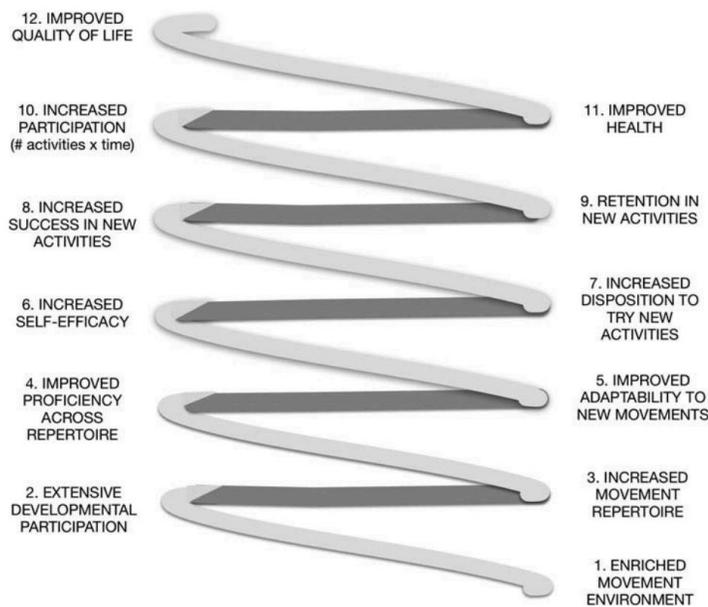
recreation stakeholders contributing to the goals of the CRF can generate the momentum for change needed in Canada. In collaboration with a variety of partners, Vivo primarily focuses its efforts on two of the five goals identified in the CRF:

Goal 1: Active Living - Foster active living through physical recreation, and

Goal 5: Recreation Capacity - Ensure the continued growth and sustainability of the recreation field.

### ***Functional Physical Literacy***

The renewed definition of recreation as defined by the CRF is, “the experience that results from freely chosen participation in physical, social, intellectual, creative and spiritual pursuits that enhance individual and community wellbeing” (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 2015). This holistic approach to personal wellness aligns perfectly with Canada’s consensus statement that defines physical literacy (PL) as the, “motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life” (Whitehead, 2010). Functional physical literacy (FPL) is described by Jurbala (2015) as having ownership of basic movement skills needed for daily life and is representative of the early steps in the virtuous cycle (model) of PL (see Figure 1). The FPL concept is grounded in the fundamental movement skills (FMS) theory that dominates the Canadian perspective of PL. The early stages of Canada’s long term athlete development (LTAD) model identify PL as a keystone to future success in sport and this notion is consistent with the position of Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada) that individuals who have competence and confidence in a wide variety of environments are considered physically literate (Canadian Sport for Life, 2012; Physical & Health Education Canada, n.d.).



**Figure 1.** “A Virtuous Cycle of Physical Literacy proposed.” Levels 1-5 may be considered as the progressive steps toward function physical literacy. Adapted from “What Is Physical Literacy, Really?” by P. Jurbala, 2015, *Quest*, 67:4, p. 367-383.

It has long been thought that over time children will naturally develop FMS; the building blocks upon which more challenging movement patterns are developed (Davis, Pitchford, & Limback, 2011; Wrotniak, Epstein, Dorn, Jones, & Kondilis, 2006). Evidence now suggests that the mature stages of motor proficiency are not achieved in all children, and that FMS development is learned (Goodway & Branta, 2003; Goodway, Suminski, & Ruiz, 2003). Furthermore, the statistics on daily physical activity (PA) behaviours demonstrate that the recreation, sport and education sectors have not been successful at providing experiences that motivate children to embrace PA for life (Active Canada 20/20, 2012; Casey, Payne, & Eime, 2009; Government of Canada, 2012; ParticipACTION, 2015; Way, Balyi, Trono, Harber, & Jurbala, 2014). An FPL framework can support the recreation sector by providing a foundation for recreation programming that is aligned with other child development models (ie. CS4L, IPLA) and motor development research. Supporting multi-sector leadership by providing PL resources and tools to enrich recreation programming could make a significant difference in the activity levels of Canadians throughout the lifespan (Hemming & Langille, 2006).

The sport and education sectors already have training tools and models in place to ensure that teachers, coaches, and leaders are well-versed in the ages and stages of physical, social, emotional and cognitive development (Bates & Eccles, 2008; Graber, Locke, Lambdin, & Solmon, 2008; Melnychuk, Robinson, Lu, Chorney, & Randall, 2011; Stodden et al., 2008). Every province and territory in Canada has physical education (PE) policies that require students to participate in some form of PA in school (Melnychuk et al., 2011). Regrettably, the quality of experience and time spent in PE class varies from school to school. Some schools are blessed with PE specialists that teach every child on a daily basis, while other students attend PE class intermittently and without a qualified physical educator. The common thread in all schools is the expected compliance of the provincial curriculum. For example, Alberta Learning has a PE Program of Studies that includes the Physical Education Guide to Implementation, Kindergarten to Grade 12 (Alberta Learning, 2000). The Alberta PE program is an outcomes-based framework for kindergarten to grade twelve students to develop knowledge, skills, and healthy attitudes towards PA. Nationally, PHE Canada provides support to physical educators through their large bank of online resources and professional development.

The sports sector has an even larger collection of materials to inform coaches and athletic administrators. The Canadian long-term athlete development plan (Way et al., 2014) is a model based on developmental “windows of opportunity” (Balyi & Hamilton, 2004). On the other hand, The Youth Physical Development (YPD) model is based on growth and maturation of males and females with a sport and performance focus, suggesting that all aspects of fitness can be trained through childhood (Lloyd & Oliver, 2012). Another example, The National Coaching Certification Program provides training and skills to create effective programming that is developmentally appropriate & sport specific (<http://www.coach.ca/fundamental-movement-skills-s16736>). There is (and should be) a cross-over in how training models and knowledge from education and sport can be used in the recreation sector.

High Five® is also an example of a nationally recognized model that services both recreation and sport programming ([www.highfive.org](http://www.highfive.org)). This organization trains recreation and sport staff in child development (ages 6-12) and provides tools to maintain high program quality in addition to giving parents information to make educated decisions. Its content is evidence-based and follows five principles:

1. A caring adult (positive support),
2. Friends (positive peer interaction),
3. Participation (make choices and have a voice in activities),
4. Play (fun, creativity and cooperation), and
5. Mastery (allowing success).

The High Five program is considered a high-level planning tool that provides guidance and standards for an overall programming philosophy. However, it lacks the specificity that a child and youth program developer might require if they are building a model based on PL. In other words, it's a broad overview of acceptable concepts without specific criteria that can be evaluated. Several other initiatives exist in Canada to promote healthy living outside of school and sport. For example: ParticipACTION's ThinkAgain campaign (<http://www.participaction.com/resources-partners/toolkit/think-again>), the ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth (formerly the Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card); <http://www.participaction.com/report-card-2015/about-the-participaction-report-card/>) and the development of the Canadian Assessment of Physical Literacy (CAPL; Tremblay, 2012).

The recreation sector has the capacity to affect the wellbeing of a broad range of community members (Active Canada 20/20, 2012), and thus, should have its own clear PL guiding principles for practitioners and parents. In order to do that, it must stop relying so heavily on the leadership of the sport and education sectors that provide resources with their specific goals in mind. Accordingly, Vivo has embarked on a collaborative effort with other recreation stakeholders to create a guiding framework of FPL that is grounded in evidence and readily accessible to all. The FPL framework for child and youth recreation programming proposed in this paper is based on the premise that a "physical activity divide" will develop when children and youth have divergent perceptions of their FMS proficiency (Stodden et al., 2008). In other words, those who have a positive childhood experience related to motor development will flourish, while those who do not will struggle to enjoy PA throughout the lifespan. Therefore, the recreation sector should develop purposeful PA experiences that are aligned with the principles of motor development and FPL in children and can fill the gap between PE and sport resources.

### ***Rationale for a Functional Physical Literacy Framework***

In most Canadian cities and towns, opportunities to participate in healthy, active living programs offered by the recreation sector are plentiful. Activities include indoor and outdoor programming with a range of low to high organization. Participation in programming varies in age from parent/tot sessions to older adult activities. The recreation sector currently provides a vast array of opportunities for healthy living without any sector-driven guiding programming resources. Because of its connection to the community and breadth of responsibility, recreation is perfectly suited to specifically address issues surrounding physical inactivity (Casey et al., 2009). The broad reach of the recreation sector makes it an ideal platform for the provision of information related to the physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains of active living.

Wellbeing must be nurtured from a young age; it develops along with the growing child and contributes to healthy maturation. Children grow at a rapid pace and early childhood development plays an important role in laying the groundwork for healthy living throughout the lifespan (Stodden et al., 2008). The lifestyle habits formed at a young age, including FMS and positive PA experiences; carry forward into healthier choices during adulthood (Lloyd & Oliver, 2012; Way et al., 2014). This type of evidence is informing practice and is already a focus of many sport and education models. The ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth, an annual publication highlighting various indicators of healthy behaviour, suggests that new models must include PL in order to change the staggering statistics of inactivity, and to meet the Canadian Activity Guidelines for Children and Youth (Janssen, 2007; ParticipACTION, 2015; Tremblay, 2012). Currently, only 9% of Canadian 5-17 year olds meet the daily recommendation of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (ParticipACTION, 2015). This year (2017) will be the first year that PL scores will be fully reported for Canadian children.

We believe that despite educational initiatives and sport development models, an FPL framework needs to exist for the recreation sector. The FPL framework is intended to be a catalyst for any recreation service provider wanting to build an evidence-based program of PA with a developmentally appropriate scope and sequence. The FPL framework will complement existing provincial physical and health education curricula that may or may not be delivered in schools. It is purposely consistent with the educational program of studies so that after-school programming supports what children are learning during the day. It is also aligned with the principles of the CS4L and other

FMS models including the YPD model (Lloyd & Oliver, 2012). This recreation-centred contribution will supplement the growing number of education and sport programs and maximize the reach of PL education for the purpose of increasing PA. The FPL framework is intended for parents and recreation leaders who play a role in helping children lead active lifestyles outside of school and organized sport settings.

Although the FPL framework is designed to be easy to understand for parents, it must also be robust enough to provide recreation leaders the knowledge and evidence necessary to design intentional child and youth programming. An FPL framework will assist recreation professionals by creating an evidence-based platform that leaders can use when designing and implementing child and youth programs. Creating consistent expectations and child and youth programming standards based on best practice, is the ultimate goal of this effort. Compiling the most current research and making it available to every recreation leader will encourage the creation of quality learning experiences for children and help to reverse the trend of physical inactivity. The Active Canada 20/20 Framework (2012), along with socio-ecological models related to active living (Sallis et al., 2006) suggest that in order to create the most effective programs, we must build on current evidence from local to national levels, create sustainable partnerships between all sectors, and support training with research in order to build capacity. The FLP framework will build on current models to create a new standard across the recreation sector, where one currently does not exist. By creating a platform based on research, knowledge, and best practices from all disciplines, recreation programmers will be able to provide effective and consistent programming across the sector.

### ***The Functional Physical Literacy Framework***

The FPL framework will be presented on a dynamic website platform that provides a compendium of knowledge for a variety of audiences. The deepest layer (3) will consist of evidence-based content including research citations, reports and articles that pertain to the three subsections: motor proficiency, cognitive development, and social-emotional maturation. Each subsection will include both recent and seminal research to show how the literature related to child development is evolving and informing the recreation sector. Full references and applicable links to more information will be provided in this layer. A team of research assistants who will scour a variety of search engines will gather content. Layer 3 is meant to act as a reference tool for those leaders and practitioners who are serious about looking for knowledge in specific areas

of PL. It will be an extensive foundation on which to build the other two more simplified layers. Vivo's research and innovation team has started to assemble the content and is committed to keeping the FPL framework up-to-date as an evolving database for current research in all domains of wellbeing.

The second layer will be the curriculum development layer. It is the translation of the content layer into practice. Practical examples of best practice and relevant instructional strategies will be shared at this level. Live links will connect the second and third layers for maximum clarity and efficiency. Staff and volunteers in recreation need knowledge and resources, as well as the skills to plan and deliver high-quality programs and services based on specific community needs and strengths (Active Canada 20/20, 2012; Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 2015). The FPL framework answers the call for an effective and accessible knowledge translation strategy for practitioners.

The primary public layer (1) is intended for a general audience external to the recreation sector and is the simplified consolidation of the content into a relevant and readable format for parents and caregivers. Infographics and easy to understand facts pertaining to developmental milestones in each of the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive domains will be neatly presented for easy access. The focus of this layer is how physical, social, emotional and cognitive developmental milestones relate to building a foundation of FPL through natural free living. This layer will be the primary opportunity for the recreation sector to reach out into the communities it serves and provide educational resources about FPL. This layer will also be designed to encourage families and communities to increase social connectedness toward the goal of healthy active living. Providing parents with an easy-to-understand educational resource about FPL milestones will improve their knowledge and serve as a reliable source of factual information about child development.

### **Conclusion**

The FPL framework will allow recreation program managers to gain insight into effective instructional practices; parents to have a better understanding of the milestones that their child may go through during preadolescence; and researchers to fully understand the evidence connected to best practice. The FPL framework is an effort to combine the knowledge that has accumulated in all areas of the sport and education sector, and apply it specifically to recreation in an accessible and easy-to-understand way for the average consumer. The FPL framework will help to strengthen the ties

between the sport, education, and recreation sectors by providing everyone with immediate access to the evidence used to make informed decisions about child and youth development. The Canadian Sport Policy suggests that strong partnerships between sectors can help recreation to provide effective program development (Government of Canada, 2012). This framework will support recreation leaders in their pursuit to create quality programming that is creative, purposeful, and meets the developmental needs of children and youth.

We have taken a multi-layered and holistic approach that acknowledges the influence of physical, social, emotional and cognitive development in the journey toward PL. This strategy is designed to engage as many people as possible in the connection between FPL and wellbeing. Plans are underway to complete the project and make it available to the public in 2018.

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