



WellSpring

Sharing physical activity knowledge

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Reach, twirl, curl up small!

Exploring physical literacy in the early years

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It is fascinating to watch the physical development of a baby first-hand as a parent or caregiver. From the first time they can lift their heads, grasp an object, roll over, crawl, or stand, to the ability to walk—ready to take on the world, one step at a time. It’s an incredible amount of physical and motor development that takes place in the first few years of life.

The Importance of Physical Activity in the Early Years

The early stage of brain development is a busy time as the brain makes neural connections and pathways that will be the foundation for all future learning. From a motor development stance, the more opportunities a child is given to move in a variety of ways, the more neural pathways that will be formed. Also the more those movements are repeated, the stronger the connection becomes. This is important because the developing brain will reduce (prune) neural connections that are not strong, allowing the brain to become more efficient.¹ This pruning process can start as early as age three and continue into the adolescent years. These strong motor pathways will serve as the foundation for learning more complex movement patterns and skills as the child grows and develops, contributing to the development of physical literacy.

Developing Physical Literacy in the Early Years

Physical literacy can be defined as the “motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life.”²

Developing physical literacy in the early years (0-5 years) is actually quite simple and can be summed up in a few words—move, explore, variety, play and fun! Young children who are given many opportunities to move each day, in a variety of ways and in different environments (e.g., ground, snow, ice and water) will create more motor pathways in their brains. With repeated exposure, these motor pathways will get stronger.

Free play is especially important in the early years and is a very natural way to develop skills—not only movement skills but social and emotional skills as well. Children are naturally curious. Allowing children to freely explore their environment and their bodies

S U M M A R Y

Physical activity in the early years (0–5 years) is an important factor for children’s development, both physically and mentally.

Developing physical literacy in the early years should be child-centered and most importantly, fun. This article highlights the importance of physical literacy and introduces the Calgary Be Fit For Life resources to support parents and childcare workers develop physical literacy in young children.

within that environment allows them to feel challenged. This is an essential piece to building confidence and intrinsic motivation. Building intrinsic motivation means that the child is motivated from the inside, from the pleasure of the activity, versus being motivated by external or outside rewards. This is a key component to lifelong physical activity participation.

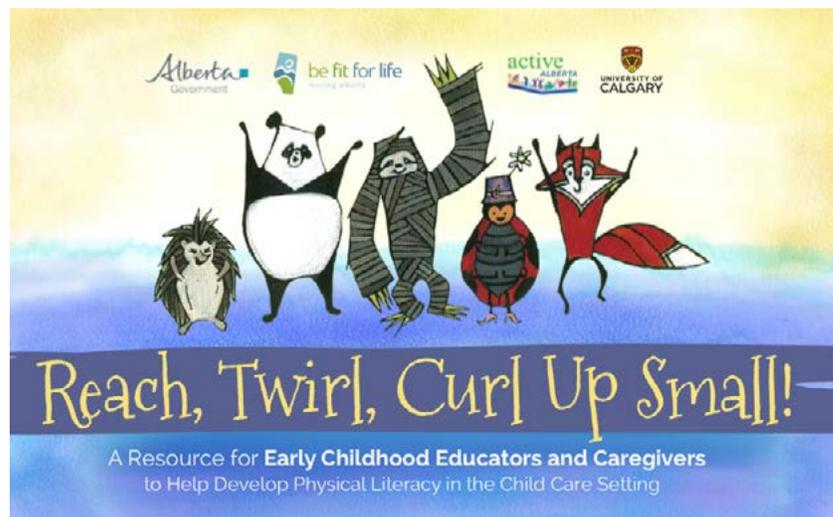
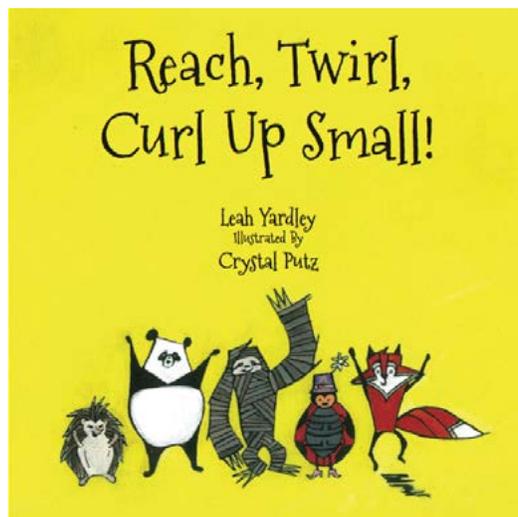
One of the best places to develop physical literacy is the outdoors. The unpredictability that the natural world can offer not only provides challenge and a means to develop physical skills, it also teaches children to assess and manage risk, another skill set that can be translated to lifelong learning. Often, man-made playgrounds provide structures in a uniform and predictable manner, whereas a natural environment are usually more random and unpredictable forcing the child to think more and repeatedly assess and manage their abilities—a far greater challenge. This is not to say that playgrounds are bad; it's just good to offer variety.

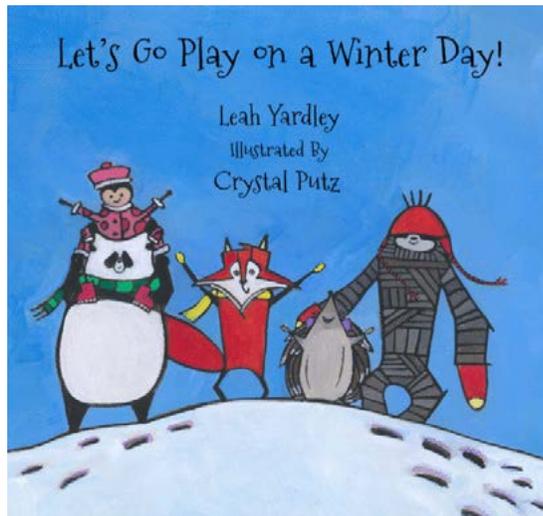
Developing physical literacy in the early years should be child-centered and most importantly, fun. As an adult, it is important for us to be good role models: offer praise for all efforts, allow children to feel challenged (you'll have to let go of the reigns a little here), and get down and play a little bit too—play is important for all ages!

Be Fit For Life's New Resources to Support the Development of Physical Literacy in the Early Years

In 2014, the Calgary Be Fit For Life Centre received a project grant to create resources to support the development of physical literacy in the early years. Funding was provided through the Recreation and Physical Activity Division Healthy Initiatives grant program of Alberta Culture and Tourism. The resulting resources include two children's books and a collection of games and activities designed to support the development of physical literacy in the childcare setting.

The first book, *Reach, Twirl, Curl Up Small!*, introduces a number of animal characters who perform various movements. It encourages children to try the movements as well. The childcare resource, also titled *Reach, Twirl, Curl Up Small!*, expands on the characters and is designed to help leaders in daycare and day home settings. It offers activities divided into *Active Circle Time*, *Active Group*, *Sing and Move*, and *Active Outdoors*.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leah Yardley is passionate about helping people find a love for physical activity as they develop their physical literacy. Leah is a mom to a 3-year-old girl, and since becoming a parent, has taken a special interest in the development of physical literacy in the early years.

The second book, *Let's Go Play on a Winter Day!*, promotes the concept of outdoor play in the winter through the use of the same characters who have fun skating, catching snowflakes and building snowmen on a beautiful winter day.

Both books were written to include different forms of movement cues, therefore, encouraging activity while reading. The author's cousin, Crystal Putz, created the artwork for the stories, and the books were self-published and printed through Sure Print & Design, a Canadian book printing company.

On the back of each book, educational information is provided for parents with respect to developing physical literacy in the early years.

Please visit www.befitforlife.ca/resources for more information about these and other resources to support the development of physical literacy in the early years.

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2. ParticipACTION, Sport for Life Society, Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research Group at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute, Physical and Health Education Canada, Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, Ontario Society of Physical Activity Promoters in Public Health, et al. Canada's Consensus Statement on Physical Literacy. Ontario: Sport for Life Society; 2015 [cited 2016 May 01]. Available from: http://www.physicalliteracy.ca/sites/default/files/Consensus-Handout-EN-WEB_1.pdf.

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