



Table of Contents



It Starts with Motivation

This resource discusses the benefits of physical activity, the theory behind motivation, and how you can use and develop motivation for physical activity with your students.

There is a link between being confident in your physical skills and being motivated to try new activities, but motivation goes way beyond that link. It is a significant predictor of physical activity.

When students feel positive emotions to being physically active, they are more likely to integrate activity into their lives...every day, in various forms, and in different environments. Physical activity is not only fun and satisfying, but it also becomes part of who they are. When this happens, they are much more likely to live healthy, active lives.



Making the Link to Physical Literacy

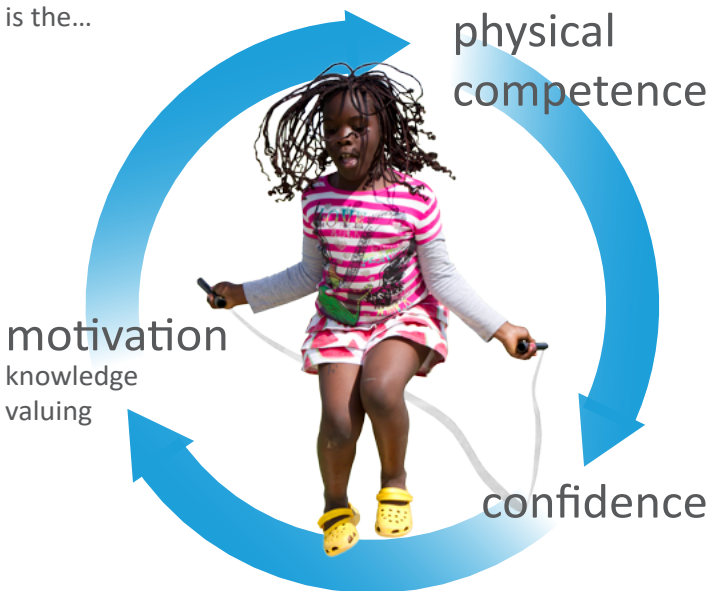
Physical literacy is defined as the physical competence, confidence, and motivation to be active for life.

Generally, physical literacy is developed through building competence in fundamental movement skills (i.e., running, jumping, throwing, etc.), which leads to the confidence to move, and the motivation to continue moving.

Much attention goes to the skills themselves, with little focus on how to build motivation or use the student's motivation to engage in physical activity. Yet motivation will be a key component if we want students to make physical activity a part of their lives.

Physical Literacy

is the...



...to be

active for life

Figure 1: Physical literacy wheel

Why Is Physical Activity Important?

The physical, emotional, mental, and cognitive benefits of physical activity are well documented. As educators, we can help start our students on a lifelong journey of physical activity and health.

Students need regular, vigorous, physical activity to:

- ensure optimum growth and development,
- help bones and muscles become stronger,
- build important connections in the brain, and between the brain and muscles, and
- maintain a healthy weight.

But the benefits of physical activity extend beyond these. Students who are consistently physically active have the potential to communicate better, to enjoy stronger social connections, to experience greater focus, to have reduced stress and anxiety, and to feel a greater sense of self-esteem.

Better Learning

Sometimes we can feel that we are reducing learning time when we insert a movement break into our school day, or take our students outside to get more activity. However, research shows that there are positive academic outcomes related to physical activity (Donnelly & Lambourne, 2011). For example, studies show an improvement in mathematic achievement linked to physical activity (Pontifex et al., 2013).

Experienced teachers will confirm that students who have had a chance to release some energy are often more settled for desk work and classroom learning.

They're Watching You!

One of the easiest ways to encourage our students to be physically active is to be physically active ourselves. Educators are role models for their students, and when students see us enjoying a game, going for a lunch time power walk, or choosing to be physically active in our leisure time, they are more likely to value activity. Students love hearing about your physical activities, goals, and challenges.



Understanding Motivation



What does research teach us about motivation? R.M. Ryan and E.L. Deci's Continuum of Intrinsic Motivation (2000) helps us to understand the various types of motivation. The chart on the next page adapts this theory for an education and physical activity perspective.

You have probably seen and heard many of the “Looks Like”, “Feels Like” and “Sounds Like” statements shown in the chart as you teach your students. Perhaps you can remember experiencing each of these yourself. Research indicates that the ideal place for lifelong motivation is integrated regulation. That means that we are motivated to do something because we have come to associate the activity with who we are, what we value, and what we believe. This can only develop when we have a certain degree of self-determination or autonomy.

So how do we help our students discover this sort of motivation?



	Absence of Motivation	Extrinsic Motivation				Intrinsic Motivation
		External Regulation	Introjected Regulation	Identified Regulation	Integrated Regulation	
Motivated By:	Not motivated	External rewards or avoidance of punishment	Fitting in, feeling good about yourself, and avoiding guilt	Doing what is important and valued	Expressing personal values and beliefs	Intrinsic Regulation Having fun and feeling satisfied
Looks Like:	Avoiding activity	Pursuing the prize	Pleasing others or yourself	Aligning with personal values	Being yourself	Seeking pleasure
Feels Like:	Resigned	Driven	Anxious	Rational	Aware	Self-Indulgent
Sounds Like:	"Because you made me."	"Because I get something I want."	"Because I should."	"Because it's important."	"Because it's who I am"	"Because it's fun or interesting."
Ends With:	No participation unless compelled	No participation if there is no reward	No participation if there's no expectations	No participation if it doesn't make sense	Lifelong participation	Lifelong participation, seeking fun and personal interest

LOW Self-Determination

HIGH Self-Determination

Figure 2: Motivation versus determination.

In the Flow

We are much more motivated to be physically active once we experience a state of flow.

Flow is the optimal state when we are completely engaged in a physical activity. We are involved in a stimulating challenge, feeling a sense of liberty, joy, and accomplishment. Our sense of time is lost, because we are absorbed in the activity and enjoying the moment.

No doubt you have felt that sense of flow before and experienced how motivating it can be. It might have been when you were physically active or when you were doing an activity that you are passionate about. But did you know that the way you teach and design your activities can help create this sense of flow for your students?

It helps to understand where flow is found:

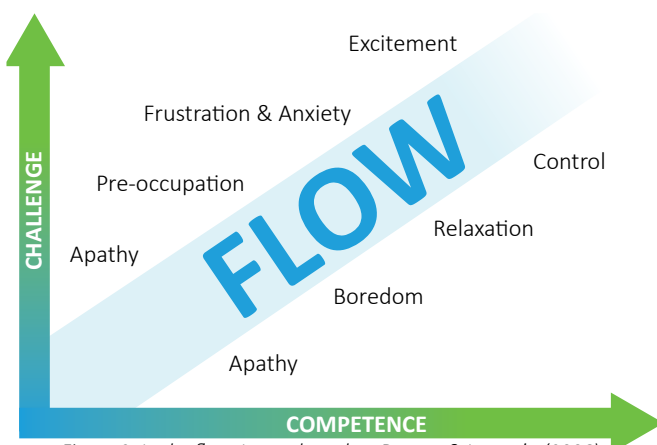


Figure 3: In the flow. Image based on Damon & Lerner's (2006) adaptations of Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Model.

Flow is linked to our competence and the challenge of the activity. If the activity is too challenging for our competencies, it can be difficult to find any enthusiasm. We must focus intensely on the activity, and we often get frustrated and anxious about our performance. Yet, if the activity is too easy, we lose interest. If there is not a sufficient level of challenge, we never reach that sense of flow. Challenge can come from the required physical skills, social interactions, communications, or comprehension to complete the activity.



Change the Game and Increase the Flow!

The fastest way to help your students get into a state of flow is to adapt the activity according to their skills, and to slowly add challenge – not too much, but not too little.

Try these adaptations to increase or decrease challenge, or just to change things up when students seem to be losing interest in the activity:

Time

Limit the time for the entire activity or game.

Display the time for students to see.

Play for the duration of a well-known song playing at the same time.



Duration

Offer more or less time to complete the individual task.

Keep the activity short to force quick engagement.

Force quick solutions by lessening the available time.

Structured vs. Unstructured



Stimulate creativity and autonomy by placing materials in a space and allowing your students to create their own game.

Material



Choose different equipment to change the experience.

Add another ball, or use a rubber chicken or scarf to make the game entirely different.





Offer Choices

Provide choice in the same activity. For example, the same balance station can have three options: walk on the line, walk on dots, or walk on the beam.

Think in terms of three difficulty levels for each activity. You will be surprised by their choices.



Space

Reduce or expand the space to change the level of challenge.

Add the complexity of having to stay within prescribed limits.

Rules & Requirements



Keep changing the rules to get everyone playing and having fun.

Use the non-dominant foot, have some students throw from a different line, require a set number of passes, or make the next goal count for more points.

Number of Participants



Decrease the number of participants in the game, to increase engagement.

Collaboration vs. Competition



Use the students' personal preferences.

Some prefer collaborative tasks, while others prefer competition.

Vary or combine the two.

Give competitive students points for desired behaviours (e.g., points for a pass).

Figure 4: Change it up!



Great Questions, Great Experiences!

Physical activity generates emotions. When students are moving, there is a release of brain chemicals called endorphins that trigger positive feelings and emotions. When these are combined with the social elements of a class game or activity, there can be a lot of great emotions that surface. But let's be honest, sometimes the emotions are not all positive.

An easy way to develop motivation for physical activity is to help your students make sense of emotions that are generated through physical activity by questioning. After your next physical education class or classroom movement break, try asking your students these questions:

1. How are you feeling after that game?
2. You two were really working well as a team! How did that make you feel?
3. What do you think we could have changed to make that activity less frustrating?
4. How did you feel when you lost that game?
5. You have really improved your catching. How does that make you feel?
6. You looked like you were having fun. What did you like about that activity?
7. What was it like to be last one to be tagged?

The objective is to help students put words to their emotions. If the experience wasn't positive for them, help them understand why and develop ways that it could be more enjoyable next time.



Giving Feedback

Of course, nothing beats positive feedback. Reinforcing a student's achievements through observations, complements, or questioning helps a student feel a sense of pride in their improvements and growth.

Try asking questions like, "Which of your challenges were you able to achieve today?" or, "What did you do particularly well today?"

Questioning gets students to engage in their improvement, and can be more powerful than a compliment. The types of questions that are asked can help your students become more introspective about how they are progressing.

Be specific about your feedback to reinforce what you are hoping that they repeat. While a "good job" feels nice, "I love the way you worked so well together" is much more meaningful and supports students' learning.



Motivating with Self-Determination

Self-determination

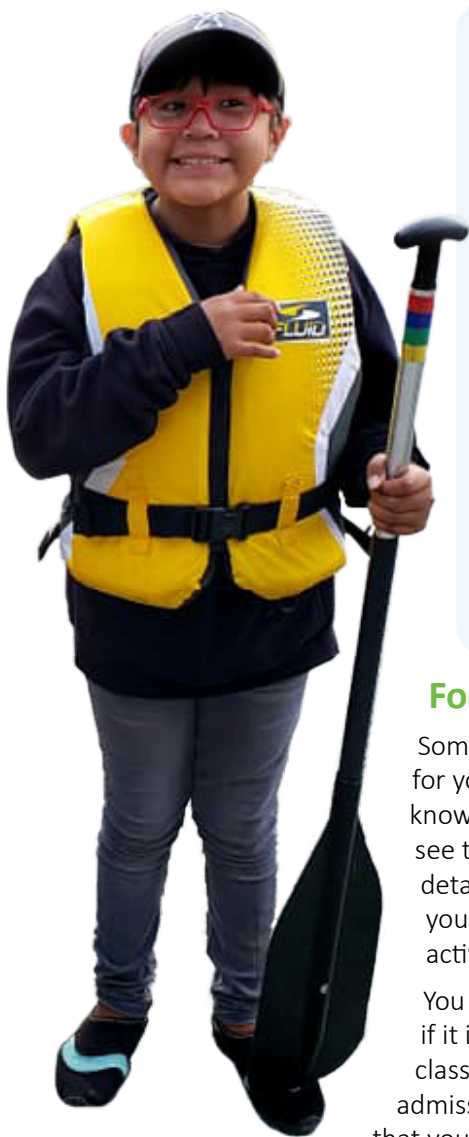
Self-determination plays a huge role in developing motivation. The more a student feels compelled or forced to do an activity, the less enjoyable and motivating it becomes. If this happens all of the time, then they come to associate physical activity with something that they have to do.

So, how do you include self-determination in your physical and health education lessons? Here are six questions that are guaranteed to help your students feel empowered.

The parenthetical notes explain why these work:

1. “Whose turn is it to lead the warm-up, today?” (Gives students responsibility)
2. “How could we change the rules to make that game more fun?” (Students own the solutions)
3. “How could we change the rules to make sure that everyone participates?” (Students realize that the rules can limit participation)
4. “Would you rather play another round of this game, or try another?” (Choice is empowering)
5. “That’s the way you play ‘regular’ basketball, but what are the rules for ‘super’ basketball?” (Let the students create “house” rules, or play a common game and let the rules be a bit silly)
6. “What would a game look like if you had to use this equipment?” (Free play and ability to create an activity from random equipment)





Activities Students Don't Like

There are some things that most students don't find enjoyable.

Try to avoid:

- long waits for their turn,
- complicated instructions,
- overly competitive games,
- games that frustrate because the skill requirements are too great,
- games that aren't fair,
- elimination games (e.g., dodgeball),
- repetitive activities, and
- norm-based standards.

Focusing on Engagement

Some activities are just not engaging for your students. Often you won't know this until you try them out and see that your students look bored, detached, and apathetic. When you start seeing this, change your activities or alter the rules.

You don't have to finish the activity if it is just not working for your class. Start with an authenticity and admission that an activity is new, and that you might need their help to make it more fun. It might be that there is not the right amount of challenge, or it could be that the activity is not a good fit for the individuals in your class.

To maximize engagement, try new games, different equipment, a variety of environments, task-based challenges, co-operative activities, and individual goals.



Personal Motivation

It's difficult to deny the connection between our feeling of competence and our enjoyment of an activity. We tend to like the activities we can do well. As a result, part of building student motivation is creating opportunities for them to improve their skills and feelings of competence and confidence.

Think of the last time you learned a physical skill like yoga or skiing. Likely, there was little social pressure or comparison to others. The focus was on your personal improvement and mastery. The instructor taught the skills in small pieces and coached you along the way, with helpful corrections to your form or tips on how to better your technique.

There was a progression in the skill development, where the initial sequences were simple and gradually became more complex. The instructor may have even assisted you in framing some goals and challenges. These goals were realistic and achievable, but not too easy to attain.

Now remember how you felt as you progressed and became more confident in your skills. The initial anxiety was gradually replaced by a sense of satisfaction with your progress and achievement.

Your students develop skills and a sense of competence the same way. The way that you structure your instruction can make a significant difference in how students develop skills and perceive their competence.



Competition

Some people are really competitive and have an insatiable drive to win. Using the motivation model, these people would be motivated by external and introjected regulation (see page 3). Most students aren't like this.

For many students, intense competition causes stress and anxiety. Keep the games fun and place a low emphasis on competition with younger students. Focus instead on personal improvement, cooperative games, and non-sport activities. Use competition to develop skills by giving points for what you are working on developing (e.g., number of passes, teamwork, or communication).



Motivated to Start

How you structure your lessons can support students with developing a love of physical activity, and a sense that being active is part of who they are as people.

The concept of physical literacy is holistic, and there is a constant interaction between physical skills, confidence, knowledge, and motivation. We can't understand motivation for physical activity if we examine it in isolation. We need to approach it from the perspective of it being both an ingredient and a result of developing physical literacy.

So when your students are playing a fun game they helped design or choose, and really feeling in a state of flow, they are building the motivation to be active for life. Your efforts can set them up for a lifetime of health and mental well-being benefits. As an educator, isn't that motivating?





*We would like to acknowledge
Bruce Deacon for his
contribution to this resource.*

For more great physical activity
and physical literacy resources,
scan this QR code:



SCAN ME

COPYRIGHT ©, PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. THIS MATERIAL IS OWNED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF BRITISH COLUMBIA AND PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT LAW. IT MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED OR REDISTRIBUTED WITHOUT THE PRIOR WRITTEN PERMISSION OF THE PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA.

Updated: June 20, 2025

