

9 ways to tell if your child is physically literate

By: Jim Grove

By definition, physical literacy comprises a complex blend of movement skills, physical awareness, cognitive understandings and even general attitudes about physical activity and sport. Researchers who study the subject produce sophisticated tests and measures for deciding who is physically literate and who is not, and they have a laundry list of criteria that they examine in the process.

But what about the average parent? Is there any quick way to assess if your child is on the road to developing physical literacy?

At the risk of oversimplification, Active for Life has produced a short list of nine simple physical tests and questions to assess the state of your child's physical literacy. These questions describe a few of the simple abilities and attitudes that are commonly associated with physical literacy in early school age children.

In short, if you can answer yes to these questions, your child is probably making good progress in developing basic physical literacy. For questions where you answer no, your child probably needs some attention in that area. And if your child is nearing middle-school age and has difficulty with these tests, then there are significant skills and capacities they need to address.

Warning: *Research scientists in physical literacy, please avert your gaze now. This article does not provide a comprehensive list of physical literacy attributes or testing protocols. This list is merely offered with a view towards giving mom and dad a quick glimpse of some of the qualities that comprise physical literacy.*

Is there any quick way to assess if your child is on the road to developing physical literacy?

1. Forward roll: Can your child do a basic forward roll on the floor? The forward roll is a basic gymnastic movement that demonstrates your child has developed a reasonable degree of flexibility and coordination, as well as proprioception (knowing where the body is as it moves through space). Simply understanding that they need to tuck their head to their chest is also significant in their basic understanding of the movement.

2. Flat-footed squat: Can your child do a flat-footed squat from a standing position and then stand up again? The flat-footed squat is considered a standard test of physical literacy by researchers and health practitioners. This movement indicates a blend of important qualities: flexibility, coordination and balance, not to mention strength. If your child has trouble keeping their heels flat on the ground while they descend into a squat all the way to the floor and stand up again, or if they lose balance and fall over in the process, your child has issues with balance as well as flexibility, coordination and strength in key muscle groups in the legs and core.

3. Swim (comfortable in water): Can your child swim? Water is one of the four key environments of sport and physical activity, along with land, air and snow/ice. Swimming is the basis of a multitude of water sports ranging from competitive racing and diving to water polo and surfing, and it is also an essential skill for lifetime safety around the water. Pretty important when you consider that 75% of our planet's surface is covered in water.

4. Throw a ball: It may seem a bit corny or simplistic, but the ability to throw a ball is a good

general indicator of a person's physical coordination and development of movement skills. It's not just about being able to play quarterback for the New England Patriots in the NFL or pitch for the Blue Jays in major league baseball. If you consider how throwing was an essential skill for our distant ancestors who were hunting with spears or knocking coconuts out of trees by hurling stones, you can see how throwing has always been a natural part of our movement skill repertoire. It involves a complicated mix of balance and coordination between dozens if not hundreds of muscles, so it's a good indicator of how much physical literacy a child has developed to date.



5. Strike an object: Can your child hit a ball with a bat? A puck with a hockey stick? A badminton bird with a racquet? See "Throw a ball" above. The same basic reasoning applies. Humans are distinguished from animals by our mastery of tools, and the great majority of our early tools were used to strike things. The only difference is that now we strike pucks and balls instead of other cavemen. (Sorry - cavepersons.)

6. Land from jumping: Watch your child as they jump from a low platform, tree branch or park bench and land on their feet. Do they land with their knees aligned squarely above their feet and flex smoothly into a squat? Or do their knees collapse inwards and their legs generally go sixteen different directions? If your child can land a jump reasonably well,

then hopping and other fundamental movement skills are also probably little problem for them.

7. One-leg balance test: Ask your child to stand on one foot for 30 seconds without losing balance. Get them to put their hands on their hips and lift the knee of their non-standing leg as high as possible. Children often end up hopping all over the place and laughing because it is more difficult than it appears. The good news is that the challenge encourages them to practice and improve their time, so you are covertly promoting the development of their balance.

8. Confidence to try sports: Kids who have a reasonable degree of physical literacy feel confident trying

a sport or physical activity that is new to them. They are confident because they know they have the basic skills in running, jumping and throwing to get started. And as time passes, they build further confidence as they experience additional successes in trying these new sports and activities.

9. Describe a movement skill or activity in words: In effect, verbal literacy is a part of physical literacy. Children who are fully physically literate should be able to describe their activity and movements accurately with the basic correct words. Why? Because words and naming used to describe movement reflect formal thinking and understanding of those same movements. It sounds a bit esoteric, but in truth it's another good general indicator.

Active for Life is a non-profit organization committed to helping parents raise happy, healthy, physically literate kids. For more articles like this one, please visit activeforlife.com



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