



What Exactly is Physical Literacy?

Perspectives from older adults and those who work with older adults



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HIGHLIGHTS

Our exploratory survey yielded insightful perspectives on the awareness and understanding of physical literacy among older adults (n=725) and those who work with older adults (n=104).

Older Adults

- 🍷 A majority of older adults (74%) had not heard of the term physical literacy prior to participating in the survey.
- 🍷 Ten themes were identified from responses by older adults on what they thought physical literacy was with “staying physically active” being the most frequently identified theme.
- 🍷 “Knowledge” was an overlapping word in many of the themes, for example, “general knowledge of physical activity”, “knowledge of the physical limitations of the body”, and “knowledge about accessible physical activities”.
- 🍷 A majority of older adult respondents (82%) indicated that they would be interested in learning more about physical literacy.
- 🍷 There is an opportunity to raise awareness and promote the concept of physical literacy as it relates to older adults. However, how physical literacy is presented to older adults (in terms of terminology and strategy) needs further exploration.

Individuals Who Work with Older Adults

- 🍷 Most respondents indicated that they had a somewhat clear (34%) or very clear (39%) understanding of physical literacy.
- 🍷 While most had either a somewhat clear or very clear understanding of physical literacy as it relates specifically to older adults, the level of understanding was lower than it was for the term generally.
- 🍷 Nine themes were identified from participant responses of what they thought physical literacy means, with “knowledge, motivation and confidence related to physical activity” being the most frequent theme identified.
- 🍷 A majority of respondents (95%) indicated that they would you like to learn more about how physical literacy may support physical activity in older adults.
- 🍷 Presented with our working group’s ecological model of physical literacy in older adults, 74% of respondents indicated that they were somewhat or very interested in the physical literacy model for older adults being formed into a resource.

INTRODUCTION



As the majority of older Canadians are categorized as inactive, it is imperative that new strategies to support active aging are explored. The promotion of physical literacy has emerged as a promising strategy to increase physical activity participation in younger age-groups in Canada and internationally. 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

(Canada's Physical Literacy Consensus Statement).

Its use in supporting older adults to become or remain physically active has not been as widely understood or utilized. Active Aging Canada along with a Canadian working group on physical literacy in older adults received funding from CIHR Institute of Aging to build on previous work (Jones et al., 2018) and plan a dissemination strategy for physical literacy in older adults. To ensure we develop materials that are truly meeting the needs of older adults and practitioners, we conducted a survey of older adults and those who work with older adults in various capacities. Specifically, and importantly to how we would frame and promote the concept, we wanted to learn if physical literacy was a familiar term to older adults, what it meant to them and if they would like to learn more about the concept. Similarly, in producing resources for practitioners to support physical literacy in older adults we wanted to again know if it was a familiar term and how it was viewed.

METHODOLOGY

Survey Design

Due to national restrictions in physical gatherings in the Spring of 2020, two online survey were conducted (one directed to older adults and the other directed at those who work with older adults). The survey was distributed via an e-blast to Active Aging Canada's member database and network (mainly older adult organizations), as well as posted on the website of Active Aging Canada and on social media accounts. To target older adults, we asked our member organizations to forward the e-blast to their older adult members. The survey included both open- and closed-ended questions in the English language.

Survey Analyses

Descriptive analyses were carried out and presented for demographic variables with frequencies reported for categorical variables. Data from the open-ended questions were recorded, themes were identified, and response frequencies were tabulated.

RESULTS



Data collection for both surveys took place over a one-month period; May 21 to June 21, 2020. There were 725 older adult respondents and 104 individuals who work with older adults responded to the survey.

Older Adult Respondents

The online survey was completed by 725 older adult individuals. Sixty percent of respondents were women and 40% were men. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 60 and 79 years (Table 1). There were respondents from every province/territory in Canada except Newfoundland and Labrador and Nunavut; with the majority from Alberta, Ontario, and Nova Scotia (Table 2).

Table 1. Older Adult Participant Age-groups

Age (years)	n
Under 50	3
50-59	35
60-69	251
70-79	324
80 +	99

n=712

Table 2. Older Adult Participant Geographical Location

Province	n
Alberta	290
British Columbia	99
Manitoba	11
New Brunswick	22
Newfoundland & Labrador	0
Northwest Territories	47
Nova Scotia	116
Nunavut	0
Ontario	122
Prince Edward Island	4
Quebec	3
Saskatchewan	1
Yukon	2

n=717

Older Adult Understanding of Physical Literacy

In the introduction of the survey, the following description of physical literacy was provided.

“Physical literacy’ means our capacity for a healthy, active lifestyle. The term was first used to describe how kids learn to move and take part in physical activity. Now we use the term to talk about adults as well – how we learn to get more active and stay that way as we age.”

Older adult participants were asked if prior to participating in the survey, if they had ever heard of the term ‘physical literacy’. A majority of respondents (74%) had not heard of the term (Figure 1). All participants were asked how well they understood the concept of physical literacy. Nineteen percent responded very well, 55% responded somewhat well, and 26% responded they did not understand the concept well at all.

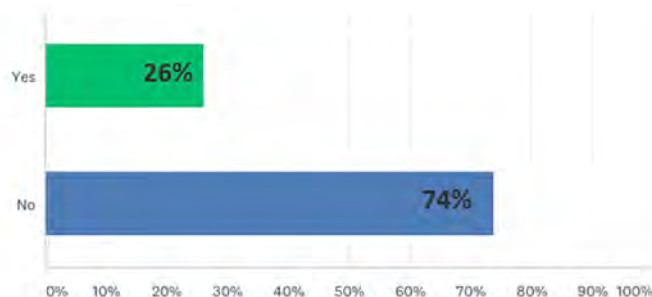


Figure 1. Older Adult respondents who had heard of the term physical literacy (n=721).

Older adult participants were then asked ‘What does the term “physical literacy” mean to you?’ in open-question format. Ten themes were identified (Table 3).

Table 3. How older adults view physical literacy

Theme	Frequency	Representative Quote
Staying physically active	354	“Being healthy and staying active as long as possible” “How to stay active and physically fit as we age” “Being active as we age”
General knowledge of physical activity	108	“Being familiar with various forms of physical activity” “Knowing about several physical activities which require movement of various levels from walking to playing tennis” “Understanding the basic concepts of proper exercise and how much exercise I need”
Unclear what it is	106	“Not sure of meaning” “Don’t know”
Awareness of importance of physical activity	81	“An understanding of the benefits of physical activity” “Awareness of the importance of physical activity” “Being able to recognise the value of physical activity”
Capacity for an active lifestyle	50	“Ability and skills to do physical activities” “Our ability and willingness to maintain physical activity while ageing” “Maintaining an active lifestyle yet respecting my body’s changes in capability as I’ve aged”
Language related to physical fitness	55	“Understanding terminology when people are talking about how to exercise” “Being able to communicate about physical characteristics of humans” “Being able to converse about physical activity”
Knowledge of the physical limitations of the body	43	“Knowing your body and how it moves” “Able to be physical and take part in activities as I am able for my age and physical abilities” “Understanding how your body ages and how to keep fit as you age”
Knowledge about accessible physical activities	13	“It means that you are aware of what’s out there in regards to physical activity for seniors and know how to access it.” “Means finding out about what activities are available and what is involved in the activity” “Knowing what resources there are in my community to achieve a physically active lifestyle.”
Learning to become active	6	“Learning about movement” “It’s understanding and learning the best way to maintain physical strength, endurance and activity.”
Diet	4	“Keeping fit and eating well” “Maintain weight at appropriate level and generally focused on general fitness”

For the next question, we took the four elements outlined in Canada’s Physical Literacy Consensus Statement that had been translated for an older adult population (Jones 2018) and put them through clear language editing. Older adult participants were presented with the description of physical literacy (below) and then asked if they would like to learn more about how physical literacy could help them to become and stay more physically active.

“One way to think about physical literacy is that it means that we stay active for life because:

- We want to be active
- We know how important it is to be active
- We know how to be active
- We know we can do it and be active safely”.

A majority of older adult respondents (82%) indicated that they would be interested in learning more about physical literacy (Figure 2). We then asked the older adult participants how they would like to receive information on physical literacy in older adults (from pre-listed options). Responses are presented in Table 4.

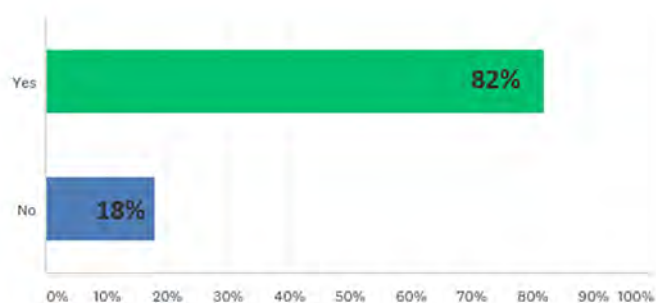


Figure 2. Older adults interested in learning more about how physical activity can help them to get and stay active. (n=716)

When asked how they would like to receive information on physical literacy (from list of options), older adults indicated a variety of ways (Table 4), both self-directed and instructional, both online and in-person.

Table 4. How older adults would like to receive information on physical literacy

Format	%
An easy-to-use website	66
An email newsletter	60
Brochures, posters and fact sheets in places like doctors' offices and pharmacies	28
Videos	28
Senior's fairs	28
An in-person course / workshop	21
Local newspaper	17
Online question and answer forum	14
A social media campaign (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on)	12
Blogs	4
Other (Seniors associations, Seniors groups, churches, fitness practitioners)	13

(n=681)

In an open-answer format, the older adult participants were then asked that what they thought is important for getting more physically active as an older adult. This question was interpreted in two ways: older adult's opinion on what is important to become more physically active as an older adult (Table 5a); and older adults views on why it is important to stay physically active into older age (Table 5b).

Table 5a. Older adult's views on what is important to become more physically active as an older adult.



Theme	Frequency	Representative Quote
Making it a [daily] routine	153	"Getting exercise every day""Routine. Having scheduled times to be active" "Getting into a routine of discipline and staying committed to the activity."
Social connections, encouragement	124	"Having someone to do it with, no fun by yourself""Social connections and support""Join activity groups or other individuals in activities. Always easier to do an activity with someone."
Senior friendly physical activity facilities	86	"Facilities that are suitable for use by seniors and personnel that are knowledgeable in activities suitable for seniors""Government sponsored group activities such as exercise classes led by a qualified personal trainer specializing in seniors' health""Easy access to programs with adequate support living in an area or environment that allows a senior to stay active"
Motivation	80	"Getting motivated and staying motivated""Be with like-minded people" "Being motivated plays a big part in getting more active"
Capacity and confidence to stay active	60	"Confidence that you can begin at any age""Understanding that it is never to late to start""Start with what you are actually able to do"
Awareness of benefits to getting active	29	"Understanding the importance of active lifestyle for good health""If you don't use it you lose it""Stay fit so you can enjoy activities with your friends and especially with your children and grandchildren" Seeing role models"
Access to enjoyable activities	29	"Access to activities that are inherently pleasant" "Convenient opportunities and making it pleasant""Enjoyment, play"
Knowledge of physical activity	20	"How to find instructors who have good training""Exercise classes led by a qualified trainer specializing in seniors' health""senior adjusted' techniques"
Financially viable options, free access for Seniors	23	"Programs priced in such a way to make them accessible to seniors on low/ fixed incomes.""Accessible and affordable options""Reasonable prices, transportation"
Don't know	13	"Don't know""Not sure"
Medical guidance	2	"Doctors approval"
Male-specific options	1	"Fitness programs in Seniors centres tend to be female oriented e.g. yoga. Encouraging older men to become involved in physical fitness by combining health information (brain fitness) with good nutrition and making meals for one as an example may attract more men."

Table 5b. Older adults views on why it is important to stay physically active into older age



Theme	Frequency	Representative Quote
To maintain health	118	“Stay healthy and live longer” “Live longer and have reasonably good health” “Allow me to live a healthy lifestyle”
For quality of life and enjoy years as a Senior	61	“Lifts one’s spirits and keeps one engaged with others in their cohort” “Very important to ensure a sense of well-being.” “Live longer, better life”
To maintain mobility	42	“To help keep our mobility. Keep joints active” “Better mobility for longer” “To maintain your strength and ability to be mobile”
To maintain physical and mental well-being	112	“Keeps both body and mind active to prevent old age feeling setting in.” “Good for health, mind, weight management, relationships, fun” “You age faster when you are not active. Mentally as well”
Prevent injuries and health issues, have fewer medical appointments	38	“Having a knowledgeable mentor, friend or coach who can demonstrate how to do the exercises in a safe way or modify the exercises to meet the level of the senior.” “Less health issues” “Keep balance, flexibility, strength prevents injuries”
To maintain mobility	42	“To continue to be stable on one’s feet” “It’s important to be mobile as much as possible, to be independent” “So you have mobility and can be active without pain and stiffness”
To maintain independence	15	“Think it is very important for seniors to stay active so that they can remain self sufficient” “Able to keep care of yourself more and be less a burden on others” “This allows us as seniors to take care of ourselves and remain in our homes for a longer period of time”
To maintain appropriate body weight	7	“Being healthier, keeping weight in control” “Maintaining healthy weight”
To extend years	4	“Live longer and healthier” “Believe it will extend the quality of our senior years”

Individuals Who Work with Older Adults



104 individuals who work with older adults responded to the survey. While there was a national response, a majority of respondents were from the provinces of Ontario and Nova Scotia (Table 6). Respondents came from a variety of professional settings, but the majority were from non-profit older adult organizations (40%) (Table 7).

Table 6. Geographical Location of Respondents who Work With Older Adults

Province	Percentage
Alberta	14
British Columbia	4
Manitoba	3
New Brunswick	2
Newfoundland & Labrador	1
Northwest Territories	1
Nova Scotia	25
Nunavut	0
Ontario	46
Prince Edward Island	0
Quebec	1
Saskatchewan	3
Yukon	0

(n=104)

Table 7. Professional setting of respondents

Professional Setting	Percentage
Older Adult Community Organization (non-profit)	40%
Public Health Organization	15%
Fitness Industry	10%
Government Institution	8%
Health Organization, NGOs	6%
Academic Institution	5%
Research	3%
Older Adult Community Organization (Private)	1%
Other (Hospital, Library, Resource Centre, Retired)	12%

(n=102)

Understanding of Physical Literacy by Individuals Who Work with Older Adults

Prior to being provided a definition of physical literacy participants were asked about their knowledge of physical literacy. They were first asked how they would rate their understanding of physical literacy. Most respondents indicated that they had a somewhat clear (34%) or very clear (39%) understanding of physical literacy (Figure 3)

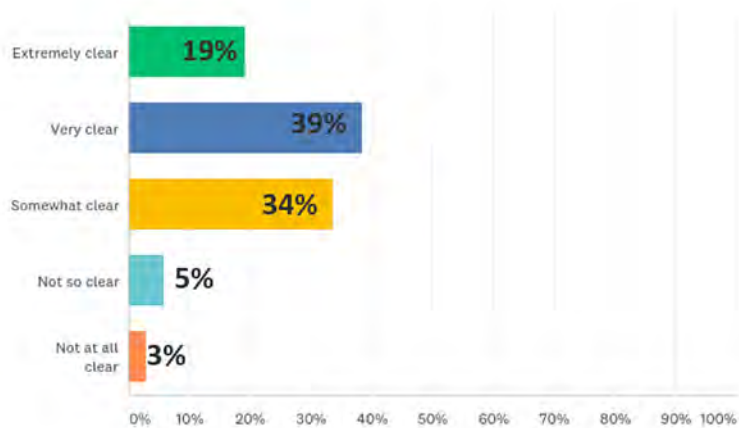


Figure 3. Rating of understanding of the physical literacy by individuals who work with older adults (n=104)

In an open question format, individuals who work with older adults were asked what physical literacy meant to them. Nine themes were identified from participant responses (Table 8).

Table 8. What does physical literacy mean to you?

Theme	Frequency	Representative Quote
Knowledge, motivation and confidence related to physical activity	82	“Knowledge, skills and confidence to move actively and safely” “Knowledge, behavior and confidence to maintain physical activity level” “It means having the competence and confidence to execute fundamental movement skills over a variety of physical activities”
Awareness of the importance of physical activity	36	“For an individual to have a good understanding of the health (both mental and physical)” “Benefits of participating in physical activities” “Understanding the value of physical activity”
Staying active and healthy	21	“Knowing how to go about keeping healthy both physically and mentally” “The knowledge of why physical activity is important for living a healthy life.” “Learning ways to stay healthy through active living”
Ability to perform physical tasks	16	“The ability of a person to move precisely through various movements with efficiency” “It means knowing how to do fundamental moves” “Basic movement fundamentals”
Integration into daily lifestyle	12	“Incorporating it into one’s life” “Have knowledge and understanding that establish physical movements are with purpose and is part of their lifestyle”
Learning ways to stay active	10	“Learn to be active and stay active through a lifetime” “Developing or acquiring fundamental skills”
Access to a variety of physical activities in multiple environments	8	“Having the confidence to be active at a variety of activities including sports, exercise, etc.” “Competence to participate in a wide variety of activities for a lifetime.”
Don’t Know	7	“No idea” “Don’t know”
Being an instructor	2	“Instructing older adults in a group or individual capacity.” “Being a leader or instructor.”

Participants were then asked how they would rate their understanding of physical literacy as it relates specifically to older adults. While most had either a somewhat clear or very clear understanding as it relates to older adults, it was lower than it was for the term physical literacy, generally (Figure 4).

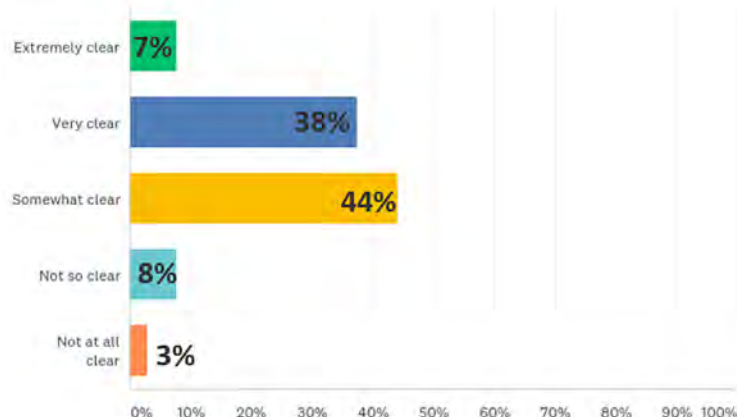


Figure 4. Understanding of physical literacy as it related to older adults by those who work with older adults.

Next the survey presented participants with the International Physical Literacy Association’s definition of physical literacy, where in addition to movement skills, includes other factors that support being physically active, specifically:

“the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life”.

Participants were asked which of the above factors (selecting all that apply) they think are important for older adults to be physically active. While none of the factors were deemed 100% critical for physical activity participation, they all were viewed as having strong impact on older adult activity levels (Figure 5).

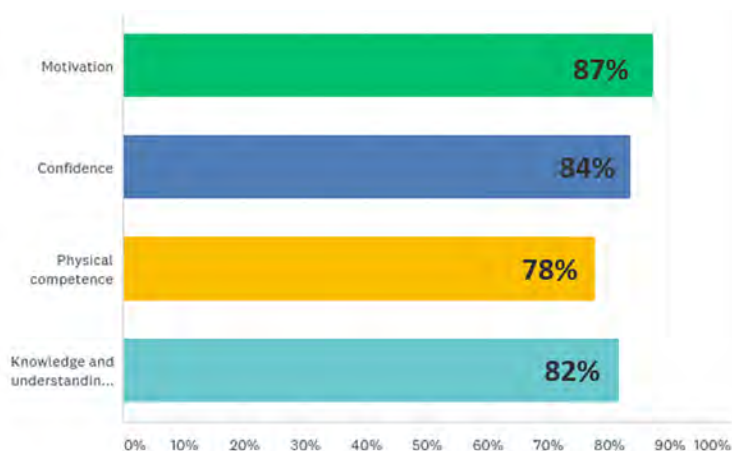


Figure 5. Physical literacy factors individuals who work with older adults think are important for older adults to be physically active

A majority of respondents (95%) indicated that they would you like to learn more about how physical literacy may support physical activity in older adults. Presented with our working group’s ecological model of physical literacy in older adults, 74% of respondents indicated that they were somewhat or very interested in the model being formed into a resource.

Participants were asked in what format(s) (from a list of options) they would like information on physical literacy and older adults? Results are listed below in Table 9.

Table 9. Desired formats to receive information on physical literacy and older adults

Format	%
Website	79%
Workshop -online	62%
Brochure	56%
Instructional Video	56%
Webinar	56%
Print Instructional Manual	39%
Workshop – In-person	36%
Research Paper	16%
Book	9%

Next, in an open question format, participants were asked how they thought we can best educate and promote the concept of physical literacy to older adults (Table 10).

Table 10. Thoughts on how to best promote the concept of physical literacy to older adults.

Theme	Frequency
Educate older adult instructors / involve stakeholders on national and local level	35
Teach and encourage older adults with a multi-pronged approach	34
Workshops, discussion groups, webinars etc.	25
Information campaign	16
Providing facilities and programs	10
Practitioners as advocates	6
Older adult testimonials	4
Social media	4
Not sure	4
Remove structural barriers	3
Integrate into home care policy	1

Finally, survey participants were asked how they thought we can best support Canadian older adults being physically active. Ten themes emerged from the responses. Accessibility and support were dominant themes and overlapped in many areas.



Table 11. Thoughts on how to best support older adults being physically active.

Theme	Frequency	Representative Quote
Accessible built environment	51	“Accessible spaces indoor and outdoor” “Safe pathways in the winter” “Use age friendly design in our communities when planning for outdoor spaces and recreation facilities” “Do a check of neighbourhood for barriers”
Increase accessible, affordable opportunities	34	“Accessibility is absolutely key-everything from public transport to providing programs where they live” “More free classes in the community.” “Provide programming that suits the needs of the senior community”
Promote the benefits and make physical activity more appealing	24	“Promote the benefits & inform of the dangers of inactivity” “Encouraging exercises for all different levels of fitness and make it fun” “Support examples of movement that fit the person’s culture and interest”
Educate those who work with older adults	21	“Qualified instructors” “Provide workshops to the immediate family members, caregivers, and hospital physical therapists” “Need to get buy-in from formal support workers”
Educate Seniors on how to exercise	12	“Many seniors have no idea how to exercise other than walk” “Promoting/encouraging adults to take on something simple and meaningful to them” “Providing them with the necessary information that is easy to understand and apply”
Provide safe and supportive program environment	9	“They need to feel like they are in a safe environment” “Provide opportunities for older adults that are safe and inviting.”
Support Senior programs	6	“Connecting with existing seniors centres to help ensure they have the supplies necessary to offer good exercise programming.” “Funding for community education & exercise programs for seniors”
Not sure	5	“Not sure” “Don’t know”
General practitioners’ referral to exercise specialists	2	“Help health providers get the information to patients (i.e. Dr’s, NP’s, physios etc.)”

Conclusions and Next Steps



As the literature relating to physical literacy and older adults is generally limited, the purpose of the present survey was largely exploratory and does have several limitations. Our sample is one of convenience of online survey respondents and therefore not representative of the whole Canadian older adult population, nor individuals/organizations who work with older adults. Also, we did not collect more detailed demographic information and physical activity history of the older adult participants. However, this survey offers a number of insights and direction into further studying the topic of physical literacy and Canadian older adults, both from the target population themselves and those who offer and deliver physical activity messaging and programming.

Additional efforts will be required to understand the resource and support needs if using physical literacy as an approach to increase the physical levels of older adults. In our goal to apply the best available evidence and practice related to physical activity and aging to optimize the health of older Canadians, we will continue our dialogue with older adults and those who work with them to inform our PLAY65+ initiative. These efforts will include Active Aging Canada's role acting as a knowledge translation broker in this area.

References

Canada's Physical Literacy Consensus Statement. Vancouver, BC; 2015. <http://physicalliteracy.ca/physical-literacy/consensus-statement/>.

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