The “Learning to Train” stage of the Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) framework is a vital part of developing physical literacy in children. This article outlines the importance of this stage, and offers insights and guidance to coaches, teachers, parents/guardians, recreation leaders, youth leaders and other adults responsible for children’s activities and sports programming, as they work to promote physical literacy in girls aged 8 – 11 and boys aged 9 – 12.

The CS4L framework includes six seamlessly linked stages, within two phases, as shown in Figure 1. The “Physical Literacy” phase is the first phase and includes the first three stages: Active Start, FUNdamentals, and Learning to Train.

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In a previous WellSpring (August, 2010), the authors suggested that promoting and supporting early physical literacy in children throughout the first three stages is vitally important, and that such support is growing in momentum in Alberta, Canada and globally (Harber & Schleppe, 2010).

This article presents a closer look at the Learning to Train stage and offers a discussion of the key elements or approaches that will help to support “pre-teens” to further develop their fundamental movement and sports skills.

Learning to Train Stage is a Period of Continued Skill Development

Ideally, the Learning to Train stage should be a period of continued skill development related to fundamental
movement, and fundamental sport skill development. These types of skill development should flow seamlessly from previous years and earlier CS4L stages.

In essence, this skill development approach is like building a comprehensive “library” or “menu” of skills and movement capability that will provide each child with a sound basis for future physical activities.

Although large aspects of potential future movement requirements are known (e.g., the need for balance, dexterity, locomotion, throwing, catching, striking, climbing, etc.), the situational specifics – particularly the possibility of innovative or novel combinations, or interpretations of movement patterns – are unknown.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that equipping children with “movement understanding and tools” during this opportune developmental period would give them a distinct advantage in the future, when they get involved in more types of activities, sports or movements.

Developing Fundamental Movement and Sports Skills

For children, the pre-teen years (prior to the extensive pubescent changes they go through) are particularly important for skill development (Viru, 1995; Rushall, 1998). The Learning to Train stage should be characterized by:

- a mix between the continuation of fundamental movement skill development; and
- more sport-specific skills acquisition.

Children should be encouraged to participate in many activities that require differing attributes and skills sets, including the variances between team and individual pursuits.

Furthermore, children should also have the opportunity to play many, if not all, positions (in team sports) and events (in individual sports) on a regular basis. This will help them to understand and “suitably experience” the range of possibilities available to them.

There should be a clear realization that the “typical rush” to an overly-focused sport specialization at these ages should be avoided. This is due to the multitude of potential negative consequences, such as repetitive injuries, excessive training regimes, a loss of fun and enjoyment, as well as inadequate fundamental movement and sport skill development.

Exemplary Instruction is Critical

The specific environment in which physical activity and sport is immersed within the community, school, and club situations is extremely important. The atmosphere, messaging, imaging, feedback, facilities, accessibility, and reward/encouragement system utilized are powerful influences on both the perception and actualization of a child’s overall experiences.

In addition, if a child has a very busy competitive calendar (which is actually more appropriate for an adult involved in a high performance sport), it typically results in inadequate practice, training, and play-time. Ironically, this overly competitive approach and use of time will likely restrict the child’s ultimate progress.

Value of Unstructured and Creative Play Time

One element that is often dismissed as unimportant or, at least, is undervalued by many adults, is play time, or time for unstructured activities.
The notion of children “playing” in their own time outside of organized activities and relentlessly repeating, rehearsing, and revising what they have been taught or exposed to is often ignored in the examination or understanding of how youngsters acquire sport skills.

The reality is that most authorities on the subject recognize that play is important for a child’s cognitive, imaginative, creative, emotional and social development, and is not simply a physical endeavor (Dobson, 2004).

Additionally, these “countless hours” of play often allow children to experiment and use their imaginations to devise new solutions to solve “movement problems,” in other words, to be creative.

Helping Children Learn to Appreciate Physical Activity and Sports

Although there is some emphasis on competition (e.g., appropriate competition, involving fundamental evaluation, modified games, etc.) at the Learning to Train stage, a higher objective at this stage is to ensure that a genuine and positive, intrinsic appreciation of physical activity and sport is established in children.

Obviously, this appreciation has to also be “converted” into actual physical participation, such that children truly understand and value physical activities (including sport) as part of a long-lasting healthy lifestyle.

The role of adults (e.g., coaches, teachers, recreation leaders, etc.) in the process of nurturing and realizing this appreciation and participation is crucial.

Parental Roles

The role of a parent (or guardian) is difficult, of course. The parent, wanting “the best” for their child, may inadvertently take only a short-term view, display a lack of patience, or have unrealistic expectations across various situations.

Most parents are well meaning, but are often ill-equipped to make informed decisions, for a variety of reasons, such as:

- a lack of real knowledge concerning child and youth development;
- lack of knowledge related to effective age-group sport programming;
- a parent’s emotional attachment to any given situation concerning their children.

It’s clear that the role played by parents is a critical aspect of each child’s experience and eventual outcome concerning physical activity and sport participation.

Essentially, a parent should aim to develop a high level of patience; this requires a very real level of resolve when it comes to their child’s physical activity. This is even more relevant if the youngster is engaged in an organized, competitive sport.

Of course, it’s natural for any parent to be inquisitive concerning a child’s progress and to be protective of the child and the child’s rights. However, this is exactly the reason why any organization (e.g., community-based, school-based, or private club-based) should have a dedicated “parent education and information” program.

In this manner, e.g., via printed materials and education/information sessions, the parents can learn more about the process their child is going through and the specific experiences a particular activity/sport will impart.

Communications to parents should address matters such as:

- basic growth and maturation information (“Parenting 101”);
- sport specific/activity specific programming;
- the evaluation system (including competition);
- equipment needs;
- financial implications; and
- future progressions, e.g., typical “paths” for the sport or activity.

Learning to Train Stage Supports Being Active for Life

An important aspect of the CS4L framework is that it encourages all children to be active for life. Figure 1 illustrates that each child who becomes physically
literate over the first three stages may continue their development through one or more of the stages in the Active for Life phase, from age 11 or 12 through to their early 20s.

Generally, children who are aiming to be involved in competitive sports will go through all of the stages in the second phase. But, depending on each child’s preferences or competencies, they may become active for life at any stage in the second phase.

In general, children who have gone through the Learning to Train stage with appropriate support and guidance will be more likely to be active for life, because they have had the opportunity to develop their fundamental skills and experience positive physical activities.

**Maximizing Benefits to Children**

The Learning to Train stage marks the overall conclusion of the physical literacy phase of the CS4L framework, which serves as the primary “foundation” phase concerning fundamental movement and fundamental sport skills.

However, this does not mean that learning has ceased or that this is a definitive point beyond which “all is lost.” Rather, it simply means that a shift in both the “plasticity and elasticity” of a child to respond to certain stimuli and experiences is occurring. In essence, the “clock is ticking” and a child is “only eight or nine-years-old once” which makes the Learning to Train stage so important.

The bottom line is that adults and parents responsible for children’s activity and sport programming need to ensure comprehensive quality programming (including ample “play-time”) during the Learning to Train stage, in order to make the best use of these formative years and maximize the benefits provided to every child from being physically active.

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