



Welcoming & Engaging School Physical Education Opportunities for Girls

A Guidebook

Welcoming and Engaging School Physical Education Opportunities for Girls

Physical and Health Education Canada is committed to ensuring that all students are given the opportunity and motivation to live active, healthy lives. This can only be achieved when all students feel that they have space and place to safely learn and grow. It is still common, unfortunately, for girls and young women to be left behind within physical and health education classes as well as extracurricular sport programs - often unintentionally.

To help teachers create more inclusive and inviting environments within Physical and Health Education Classrooms across the country, PHE Canada has worked with Dr. Louise Humbert from the University of Saskatchewan to determine and compile best practices and helpful hints in this document.

A review of key literature and several interviews with active teachers have led to the development of this guide, which is supported by Sport Canada.

Within this guide there are 7 components of your classroom and teaching style outlined for you to consider as you establish your Physical and Health Education classes. For each, there are critical questions to ask yourself and practical suggestions for making change in your class.



Table of Contents

1	Learning Environment	3
2	Student Voice and Choice and Leadership	7
3	Authentic Assessment	11
4	Social Connections & Relationships	14
5	Developing Physical Literacy	17
6	Diversity and Advocacy	21
7	Fitness Focus & Lifetime Wellness	25



1

Learning Environment

A positive, safe, and engaging learning environment, where everyBODY is celebrated as a key feature of a welcoming and engaging physical education program should be created.

Questions to ask Yourself

- 1 Are any images in the space reflective of diverse physical abilities, body sizes and outward appearances? Can female students “see themselves” in the images?
- 2 If changing clothes is an expectation, is the changeroom space well-maintained and inviting? Have expectations surrounding changeroom behavior and usage been clearly communicated?
- 3 Is gender-neutral, inclusive language actively used during instruction and feedback?
- 4 Have routines, procedures, and expectations students will adhere to throughout the duration of the course been clearly communicated?
- 5 Are you teaching, discussing, role-modeling and praising behavioral expectations such as respect, communication, teamwork and cooperation?
- 6 When possible, is active participation and activity role-modeling a priority?
- 7 Have you emphasized to students that learning happens at a different pace, but that learning and improvement in PE is possible for all students through risk-taking, practice, goal-setting, and feedback?

What does this look like in your classroom?

- Have students help to create posters to hang in your space that showcase girls and women with diverse abilities, body sizes and physical appearances.
- Use questionnaires to learn more about what students need to feel safe in change rooms.
- Have your students help you make the change room as welcoming as possible; work together to find magazine articles, inspirational quotes, or any other visuals that promote strong women, and focus on positive messaging surrounding health and wellness.
- Use inclusive language that is conducive to body positivity when describing girls' in physical activity settings (e.g. athletic, skilled, focused, strong vs. toned, small, skinny).
- Address how language that reinforces negative stereotypes towards girls (e.g. calling modified push-ups "girl" push-ups) can impact self-belief, confidence and participation.
- Address the group as "people", "folks", or "students" instead of more gendered terms like "guys".
- Spend time at the beginning of the year explaining and practicing the routines and expectations present in your class (e.g. entering and exiting the gym, where attendance takes place, how to handle equipment set-up/take-down, etc.).
- Use role-play scenarios, group discussions, or journaling prompts to demonstrate and explore behavior expectations such as respect, communication, teamwork, cooperation and encouragement.
- Use personal narratives to show why you care about an activity, and why it is important.
- Help students focus on the process instead of the outcome when creating health and wellness goals.
- Consider aspects of the TARGET model for mastery motivation (<https://www.thepeproject.com/motivation/index.html>) when planning.



2

Student Voice and Choice & **Leadership**

Girls are more engaged and show higher levels of participation in classes where they feel their opinions and feelings matter. Physical education should provide opportunities for choice, autonomy, and leadership development.

Questions to ask Yourself

- 1 Are students provided ample opportunities to share their likes, dislikes, and feelings with their teacher on a regular basis?
- 2 Is student feedback acknowledged, valued, and used to inform teaching strategies? Is gender-neutral, inclusive language actively used during instruction and feedback?
- 3 Are there opportunities for students to peer teach, choose or lead their classmates in an activity? Are you teaching, discussing, role-modeling and praising behavioral expectations such as respect, communication, teamwork and cooperation?
- 4 Are students able to choose from a number of activity/equipment options to learn, practice, and demonstrate their skills and knowledge?
- 5 Do you provide a variety of competitive levels for students to choose from during your instruction?

What does this look like **in your classroom?**

- Administer a student survey about physical activity preferences and past physical education experiences at the beginning and throughout your course.
- Utilize student journals as a way to continually check-in throughout the course. Use open ended questions that allow students to reflect on their own experiences.
- Ask students (both individually and as a group) how they are feeling during an activity, or unit.
- Take student feedback seriously by incorporating their ideas into your planning (when possible).
- Validate and acknowledge students' feelings. Emphasize that your goal is to help them find activities they enjoy, but that they won't necessarily enjoy all activities.
- Acknowledge and discuss bad days and discomfort in PE and then explore solutions together.
- If possible, provide students with a choice between co-ed and segregated courses.
- Ask students to help you create a class playlist that will serve as the soundtrack to your course.
- For primary students, provide opportunities to choose a warm-up activity or demonstrate a skill for the class.
- For middle years students, invite students to lead the class in a warm-up or activity, give demonstrations or teach activities in which they are skilled.
- For secondary students consider a full leadership unit including the opportunity to teach younger students and their peers.

What does this look like **in your classroom?**

- When appropriate, allow students to choose their piece of equipment.
- Provide choice within fitness components, especially during warm-ups.
- Provide choice in skill stations (e.g. choose 3 of the 5 stations to attend).
- Use choice boards, bingo, or tic-tac-toe to allow students to choose from a number of activities that address the lesson goal.
- Plan for days within the week or month where students can “Choose Their Own Adventure” (e.g. yoga on one half of the gym, interval training on the other, with a Just Dance option).
- Teach the same skill but offer competitive and non-competitive activities in which to practice.
- Allow students to choose between competitive and non-competitive options.
- Encourage “changing out” but allow students to decide for themselves. Provide multiple spaces to change including group, private, and non-gendered.



3

Authentic Assessment

Assessment measures that are authentic, meaningful, and can have real-world applications are a crucial component of physical education program that is engaging to girls and young women.

Questions to ask Yourself

- 1 Are assessments based on the provincial curriculum?
- 2 Are assessments used as a tool for the purpose of improving students' learning? Is gender-neutral, inclusive language actively used during instruction and feedback?
- 3 Are clear explanations provided regarding the “why” behind each activity and assessment?
- 4 Are students given different opportunities to showcase their learning throughout the course?
- 5 Are students involved in the assessment processes?

When completing fitness tests or any type of physical activity challenges...

Ensure students are familiar with the tests, and are not on display when completing them.

Place a clear emphasis on using the results as a benchmark for improvement.

Use testing as an opportunity for students to learn more about their current levels of fitness.

Focus on using the data to set meaningful, individualized goals.

What does this look like in your classroom?

- Spend time at the start of each lesson identifying the learning goals (taken from the curriculum), explaining why they are important, and demonstrating what success looks like in this lesson.
- Use language throughout your lesson that refers back to your learning goals/objectives/outcomes.
- Prior to presenting an assessment, reflect on the “why” behind the assessment. Ensure you share the thought process with your students to help them understand the value present within the assessment measure.
- Add variation to your assessments by including a number of formative and summative assessment measures such as observations, conversations, checklists, peer-assessment, rubrics, quizzes, inquiry reports, journal reflections etc.
- Focus on using multiple measures to judge progress (e.g. when assessing a fitness run, record times, but also add open-ended reflection questions like “how did I feel?” and “did I run the whole time?”).
- Utilize criteria established collaboratively in multiple dimensions of your course (e.g. What are 5 key cues when performing a free-throw? What criteria would we use to identify appropriate levels of respect and communication?).
- Emphasize the importance of testing as a benchmark that can be used for improvement; ensure students understand what their test results mean in regard to their current level of health.
- Prior to the actual “testing,” ensure students clearly understand the requirements for each test item and have ample time to practice for it.
- Create testing stations and rotate students through these stations in small groups.
- Allow students the opportunity to choose which domain of their fitness they would like to improve.



4

Social Connections and **Relationships**

Embrace and encourage the social nature of physical activities by fostering a sense of belonging and community within your classes.

Questions to ask Yourself

- 1 Do you discuss the importance of social support, positive peer relationships, and encouragement both in physical education and other physical activity environments?
- 2 Do you focus on continually developing a sense of community within your class?
- 3 Do you use a variety of grouping strategies to organize students throughout your lesson?
- 4 Are there strategies in place to ensure all students feel included?
- 5 Do you work to establish trusting relationships between yourself and your students both inside and outside of the learning environment?

What does this look like in your classroom?

- Emphasize the social aspect of physical activity by talking about ways you can connect with others through activity (e.g. walking with a friend by the river, going to the YWCA to play squash, heading to a bootcamp with your family member etc.).
- Build time and activities into your program that allow students to talk, work together, and be social (e.g. through activation or warm-up activities, prior to water breaks, etc.).
- Include cooperative games and team building activities to help establish a sense of community within your class. Explicitly emphasize major team-building concepts such as trust, cooperation, communication and risk.
- Plan your groups or teams prior to your lesson, and share them so students know exactly where they belong prior to starting games or group activities.
- Utilize a variety of ways for grouping to help students feel comfortable and safe (e.g., all bright shirts together, use experience lines to create partnerships, start with peer/friend groups first, then mix it up once students are already in activity).
- Spend time modeling what to do when your students see someone who does not have a group.
- When teaching the significance of developing belonging within your class, use the Circle of Courage model of positive youth development.
- Use personal narratives to let students know more about you; consider sharing how you are active in your leisure time, or with your family, and how these activities help you connect with others.
- Work to connect with students outside of your learning environment (e.g. in the main entrance at the start of the day, in the halls between classes, at lunch, etc.).



5

Developing Physical Literacy

For girls, feeling competent in their abilities to support physical literacy is a major determinant of confidence. Girls and young women also report a desire to engage in lifetime activities. A physical education program that focuses on developing physical literacy early will help girls and young women feel competent and comfortable in PE.

Questions to ask Yourself

- 1 Are students explicitly taught fundamental movement skills using developmentally appropriate cues, and provided various practice opportunities in safe, low-risk environments?
- 2 Are learning experiences differentiated and/or scaffolded?
- 3 Are students receiving frequent and accurate feedback regarding the skills and behaviours being taught?
- 4 Are you providing many different ways for students to learn and demonstrate skills, tactics and strategies?
- 5 Is the sport, or activity-specific vocabulary being taught and used accurately throughout the class?
- 6 Are students encouraged to demonstrate and praised for a variety of desired behaviours including the social-emotional goals of physical education?
- 7 Are there opportunities to engage in 'lifetime activities' such as non-sport, individual, creative and fitness activities?
- 8 Are students being introduced to neighborhood/community physical activity opportunities?

What does this look like in your classroom?

- Provide plenty of practice time and feedback in small comfort-groups or individually before performance in a large group game, or for assessment purposes.
- Focus on teaching fundamental movement skills early and often. Re-teach as necessary.
- Provide varied opportunities and environments for practicing fundamental movement skills.
- Clearly post cues, diagrams, and language of commonly used movements for students to reference whenever needed.
- Use developmentally appropriate cues. The quantity and content of cues given to a student in grade one should not be the same as those in grade seven.
- When introducing a new skill, tactic, or strategy, consider using the “explain, demonstrate, observe, correct” approach.
- Start with basic forms, or part of a skill and progress towards the complete skill. Create ways to work at their own pace through their learning.
- Build up to ‘full game’ play with activities such as small sided games, half the players, fewer (or more) rules, etc.
- Differentiate skill development and related activities whenever possible so that students are working at an optimal challenge level.
- Build feedback into each lesson so that students are receiving regular, accurate feedback about their skills. This formative assessment can be provided by the teacher, a peer, or by self-reflection.
- Use a variety of research-supported pedagogical models such as TGfU (Teaching Games for Understanding), Sport Education, and TPSR (Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility) for different units throughout the year.
- Provide the why of physical literacy by explaining to students the complementary relationship between participation, skill development, and knowledge.

What does this look like **in your classroom?**

- Practice makes progress! Help students to see that like reading, spelling, math, and videogames, it takes time, risk, practice and failure to successfully learn skills.
- Provide many ways for students to learn skills, tactics and strategies including (but not limited to): verbal, visual, written/diagrams, and kinesthetic.
- Connect fundamental movement skills to the games and activities with which students are familiar.
- Teach movement and sport-specific vocabulary and then use the terms appropriately. Encourage your students to do the same.
- Praise students for a variety of desired behaviours including skill development, effort, risk-taking etc.
- Explain and model what appropriate peer to peer praise looks like (e.g. “That was an awesome throw!” or “I feel like we are doing a great job of including everyone!”)
- Be creative in interpreting your curriculum and introduce your students to new and novel physical activities.
- When safe, conduct physical education on a variety of surfaces (i.e ice, water, snow) and during all seasons and weather.
- Be sure to include non-sport units and activities such as yard games, orienteering, team building and cooperation.
- Remember that many different activities can help to develop the same, or similar skills. Provide choice and avoid repetition and long sport-based units.
- Showcase the physical activities that your community has to offer by taking short trips to local tennis courts, playgrounds, ice rinks, yoga/dance studios and fitness centers.
- Help to bridge the physical activity gap between school and the community by inviting local instructors, coaches, nurses, and other experts into your classroom.
- When possible, include opportunities for certifications such as fitness leadership, refereeing, CPR and First Aid.



6

Diversity and Advocacy

Girls are diverse! Be mindful of intersectionality and avoid assumptions. Creating opportunities to explore social justice issues in the physical education environment can be a powerful way to engage girls.

Questions to ask Yourself

- 1 Are differences amongst students celebrated?
- 2 Are there spaces for LGBTQ2S+ people to feel comfortable and included in physical education?
- 3 Are activities, pedagogical approaches, assessments, and language culturally responsive?
- 4 Do you provide opportunities for students to reflect on and discuss their own and others' barriers to physical activity?
- 5 Are students encouraged to build and/or find a physical activity community where members support one another?
- 6 Are students treated as individuals with diverse, intersectional experiences with physical activity?

What does this look like **in your classroom?**

- Acknowledge the ways that students in your classes differ from one another and celebrate those differences.
- Point out that students in the class may have different backgrounds, skill levels, strategies, comfort levels and styles but show them that they can all work together.
- Provide and normalize the use of private, non-gendered changing spaces, washrooms and pronouns.
- Ask and use students' preferred name(s) and pronoun(s).
- Introduce students to athletes, fitness instructors, teachers and leaders who look like, or may have similar backgrounds as the students in your class.
- Invite students to share physical activities that are popular in their own family or culture.
- If a physical education uniform is required, include many clothing options including pants, shorts, skirts, dresses, headcoverings, long and short-sleeved shirts.
- Invite students to openly discuss stereotypes regarding girls in sport, physical activity and physical education.
- Teach students about the socio-historical roots of prejudiced ideas surrounding girls and women in sport.
- Facilitate opportunities (e.g. journal prompts, think-pair-share, group discussions) for students to identify barriers to their own physical activity enjoyment and participation.

What does this look like **in your classroom?**

- Work with students to understand the barriers and determine courses of action to reduce or eliminate their effect on physical activity opportunities, motivation and enjoyment.
- Identify barriers that students have in common and those that may differ based on culture, skin colour, gender identity and sexual orientation, Indigenous status, socio-economic status and other identities.
- Never assume a student has experiences, feelings, limitations, or dispositions toward physical activity and education based solely on their gender identity. If in doubt, ask!
- Consider providing non-sport physical activity options within extracurricular opportunities, clubs etc.
- Consider including a social justice project into your course that may involve volunteer work, educating others, researching athletes, celebrities, and leaders who are working for social change.



7

Fitness Focus & Lifetime Wellness

Learning about health-enhancing behaviors such as daily physical activity, healthy eating, mental well-being and goal-setting can provide your students with the tools they need for a lifetime of wellness.

Questions to ask Yourself

- 1 Are activities from a variety of health-related components of fitness (strength, flexibility, endurance) represented throughout lessons?
- 2 Are new, novel and popular physical activities represented?
- 3 Do students know how to locate and learn about physical activity opportunities within their communities?
- 4 Is educating students on the importance of goal-setting and healthy-habit formation a focus of the program?
- 5 Is there a focus on showcasing the connection between mental and physical health?

What does this look like in your classroom?

- Try creating a warm-up schedule that focuses on one health-related component of fitness per day (e.g. cardio on Monday/Wednesday, strength on Tuesday/Thursdays, flexibility on Friday, etc.).
- Help students understand the vast array of fitness and training options available on YouTube, or any free fitness apps. Model the use of these free videos and apps during your class.
- Work to stay up to date with new and novel fitness activities such as Barre, HIIT Training, Zumba, Pow-Fit, Drum Fitness, etc. If you are not familiar with them, find videos to show your class!
- If possible, find and visit as many community physical activity venues as possible. If visiting is not feasible, have students complete a community mapping exercise that focuses on identifying spaces and opportunities (e.g. parks, gyms, classes, etc.) for physical activity within their community.
- Use any technology available to you (e.g. heart rate monitors, pedometers, apps, etc.) to help students monitor aspects of fitness (e.g. heart rate, step count, distance traveled).
- Help students create a schedule that incorporates periods of activity into their day (e.g. walking to school, going to intramurals at lunch, walking my dog after supper, etc.).
- Give students the opportunity to set goals early and often throughout your physical education class using the cycle of Self-assessment - SMART Goal Setting - Choosing Activities - Developing a Plan - Monitoring Behavior (Guy LeMassieur 2020).
- Focus on setting goals from a variety of dimensions within your overall health (eg. physical goals related to nutrition, activity or sleep; mental health goals related to meditation or journaling).
- Identify the link between mental and physical health by reflecting on changes in mood and energy levels before, during and after physical activity.
- Highlight stats, studies and articles that showcase the connection between mental and physical health.
- Allow students time daily or weekly to rest and connect with their bodies by doing guided relaxations, readings or mediations with your class.

To best develop and co-create programming that is inclusive for all students, explore PHE Canada's gender equity resources, found here:

phecanada.ca/genderequity

