JUNIOR SPORT

with Glynis Nunn

A read on physical literacy

Kids need to learn benefits of activity

Glynis Nunn says physical activity for kids is vital. Picture: Glenn Hampson

It is no surprise when I say that sport is my life and that I hold 'physical literacy' high on my list of important factors of life.

Physical literacy is described as "lifelong holistic learning acquired and applied in movement and physical activity contexts. It reflects ongoing changes integrating physical, psychological, social and cognitive capabilities."

When you think about it, these elements are vital in helping everyone lead healthy and fulfilling lives through movement and physical activity.

In children, it includes the ability to catch, jump, run, swim and throw. These are just a few examples of physical literacy in action. Skills like these are the building blocks for children to commence a strong foundation to confidently participate in activities from a young age.

Last week, as in all school holidays, the Gold Coast Academy of Sport conducted sprint clinics for young children to teach them how to become more balanced, efficient and faster when they run. It was encouraging to see that most improved during their time with us.

But, this is a skill that must be practised. Along with learning to swim, this is a crucial element of movement education.

I understand when parents always take their children to learn to swim classes, because, let's face it, this is important. We live in a country that is surrounded by water and the climate encourages everyone to go to the pool or beach. Along with swimming, I feel that it is important to teach young children how to run. They become more balanced and able to perform well in many different sports. Many say that running is innate – I beg to differ as I have seen many different running styles. While not a 'life or death' activity like swimming, running is generally the basis of any sport and if children are taught well, they will most likely enjoy their sport far more.

I was raised on a farm and was active from a very young age. Sport and physical activity has always been a huge part of my life as well as my children – (they had to run to keep up with me!) A study in Perth not so long ago described the majority of Gen Z kids (born between 1997-2015) displayed a lack of physical and motor skills compared with previous generations. This has continued to be the case.

It has been proven that physical activity improves academic performance, cognitive skills, mental health, psychological wellness, social skills, and healthy lifestyle habits. Quite simply, 'physical literacy' is just as important as the ability to read and write.

It is also important for children to understand that life is about winning and losing. Coming into the grand final weekend, everyone understands the importance of preparation.

This preparation is life long and an understanding of competition is essential. There will always be a winner and a loser and we all must get used to this – it is part of life from school through to getting a job. There is no participation certificate at the end of major competitions.

Children need to have the ability to explore risk-taking and know their own personal limitations to challenge themselves further.

Nowadays, they do not seem to be getting the same exposure to the sort of competition and sport that people in the 40s and 50s had growing up. Of course, this is my opinion, but many researchers are finding that young children are tending to lead a more sheltered upbringing and are inclined to sit in front of gaming consoles or computers. I would challenge anyone who disagrees with me.

In schools, activities such as gymnastics and some disciplines in track and field are not covered any longer which is really disappointing. There are also much stringent rules around activities young children are able to be involved in during break times.

The fear of injury and litigation is making it more difficult for young developing children to enjoy the freedom many of us Gen Xs were lucky enough to experience.

It is becoming increasingly important to upskill sports coaches and PE teachers as this will build and promote a lasting culture that makes physical literacy just as much a priority as subjects like mathematics and science.

If you are reading this, then I am preaching to the converted because you are interested in sport. You understand the importance of young children and adults being involved in activity. To be involved in sport at an early age and have the basic fundamental movement patterns means you will generally be an active adult. When we look at the benefits of being physically active they are too many to ignore.

These include:

- Improve your memory and brain function (all age groups)
- Protect against many chronic diseases
- Aid in weight management
- Lower blood pressure and improve heart health
- Improve your quality of sleep
- Reduce feelings of anxiety and depression
- Combat cancer-related fatigue
- Improve joint pain and stiffness
- Maintain muscle strength and balance
- Increase life span.

I think the above points speak for themselves – it is all about our quality of life.

The academy is proud of the programs that we conduct and the young developing athletes that are participating in them. We thank the many partners and sponsors that we have to allow us to put these programs on.

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Glenis Nunn is an Olympic champion and the executive director of the Gold Coast Academy of Sport

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