

ACTIVATING AURORA: Older adults can be better ?Movers?

By Ron Weese

At Activate Aurora, we are paying serious attention to our older adults. For the record, an older adult is someone 45 years of age or over. In Aurora, this is a large group.

In fact, just under half of Aurora is in this older adult category with the most recent census counting 27,699 people in that cohort. That is a sizeable portion of our citizens and they deserve attention when it comes to healthy physical activity.

We are always looking for unique programs to serve this group and through our contacts at Sport for Life, we learned of an interesting concept from the Netherlands that we are exploring with the Town and our Older Adult Network.

It seems that the Netherlands has decided to approach one of the greatest and most expensive health issues facing the older generation by using movement education. According to Statistics Canada, it is estimated that approximately 30% of older adults report falls each year in this country and the cost of injuries caused by these falls approach \$2B each year. Tragically, deaths from falls are also on the rise annually.

While the Dutch call what they do movement education, we call it physical literacy.

Many people think that physical literacy is something that only kids develop. But it isn't just for kids. We know that as people age, they may lose movement skills when not practiced. It is a process known as ?pruning.? It is a natural process the brain uses to reserve brain cell connections for activities that are needed.

When a motor skill isn't used, the brain ??prunes? the connections so those brain cells can be used for some other purpose. As people age, or as they become less active, they forget how to move well. Locomotion, balance and stability suffer and tragically falls occur.

Additionally, it is also known that many older adults however are not ?frail? and, in fact, are eager to become better ?movers.?

Older adults can not only learn new and complex movement skills but as importantly they can re-learn old locomotion and stability skills quickly. It makes perfect sense that older adults therefore be engaged in specific activities that help them with their locomotion, balance and stability and even teach them to be able to fall correctly and safely in a secure environment. It doesn't matter what age a person starts to become a ?better mover' as everyone can learn new skills.

The approach we are taking is much like the Dutch. We are creating an ?Abilities Course.?

It is an opportunity for participants to learn about how to become better movers and to practice movement skills under supervision, with family members involved. Participants learn about where to look and how to observe the surface environment.

They learn how to navigate uneven and unstable surfaces. They learn how to fall correctly, much like we teach gymnasts and skiers who need to protect themselves when they take a tumble. With practice, they become better movers and gain confidence so they can become more independent and safe wherever they move; whether it is in or outside the home.

Our Abilities Course is now in its first phase of development. Our Exercise is Medicine Working Group, including local physicians, physiotherapists, exercise specialists and those who work directly with seniors in local residences, is creating a unique and important training system for our older adults.

With financial assistance from sponsors and provincial grants, we will be building this portable course and deliver the Program in the Community through Town-owned and private facilities.

To learn more about this and other Programs for our active community visit www.activateaurora.com