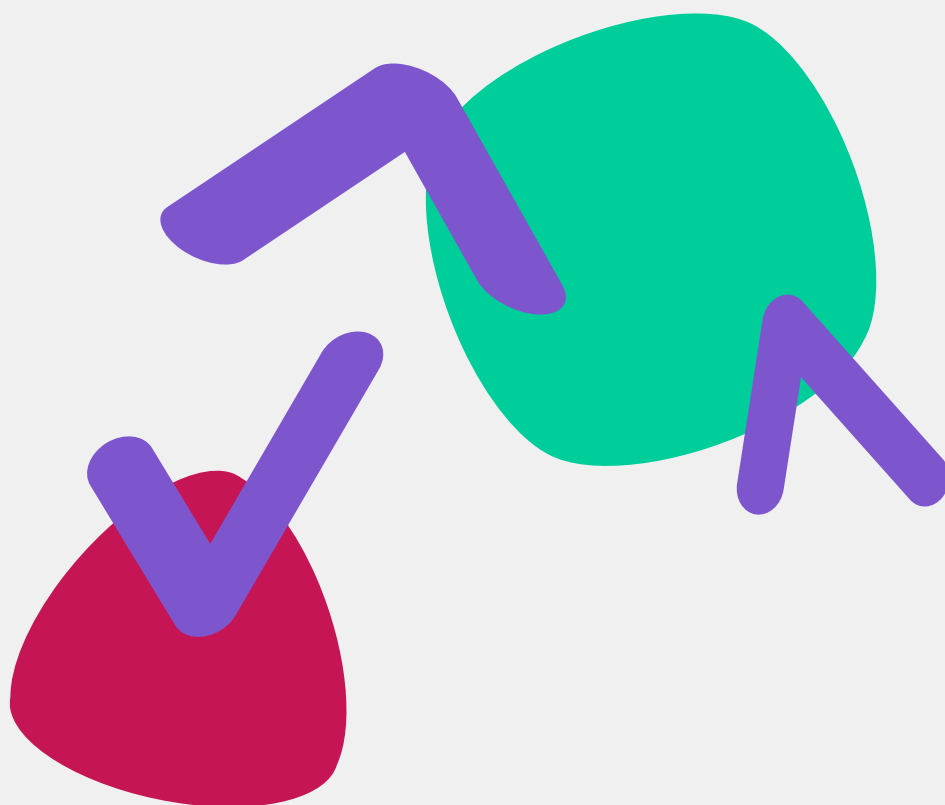


# Essential Competencies for Qualified Exercise Professionals Working with Persons Experiencing Disability



**CDPP 2.0**  
Canadian Disability  
Participation Project

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# Preface

## Funding

This work was supported by a Partnership Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the Canadian Disability Participation Project 2.0.

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We are incredibly grateful to the many members of the team who have contributed to this framework.

# Introduction

## Rationale

Persons experiencing disability face many barriers to full and effective participation in exercise. Support from qualified exercise professionals (QEPs; clinical exercise physiologists (CEPs), certified personal trainers (CPTs), kinesiologists (KINs)) can alleviate some of the barriers to exercise faced by persons experiencing disability. However, there are actual and perceived gaps in the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of QEPs to provide safe, welcoming, and inclusive exercise experiences for persons experiencing disability. In recognition of these gaps, the Canadian Disability Participation Project (CDPP) 2.0 co-developed a Disability-Specific Competency Framework for QEPs.

## Why use this Framework?

The Framework aims to describe the ideal competencies necessary to provide a safe, welcoming, and inclusive exercise experience for persons experiencing physical, developmental, and/or sensory (herein diverse) disability.

## Who can use this Framework?

The Framework is intended to be used by QEPs, persons experiencing physical, developmental, and/or sensory disability, accreditation bodies for QEPs, educators of QEPs, and employers of QEPs.

This document is designed to share the Framework with QEPs, accreditation and professional bodies, employers of QEPs, and researchers. Further research is underway to inform the development of additional resources that will support the use of the Framework across these audiences, and in collaboration with persons experiencing diverse disability. If you are interested in contributing to this research, please contact Dr. Alexandra Walters at [awalters@ualberta.ca](mailto:awalters@ualberta.ca).

## What can it help you do?

The Framework has been developed for a wide variety of purposes and [end users](#). The Framework can be used for:

- **Education and Training:** Organizations can audit existing training opportunities, curriculum, and programs to identify gaps.
- **Recruitment and Hiring:** Supports the development of job descriptions and hiring tools for roles involving QEPs who work with persons experiencing disability.
- **Advocacy:** Assists individuals, organizations, and QEPs in promoting disability-specific exercise services and education.
- **Auditing and Self-evaluation:** Enables QEPs to self-assess their competence in supporting persons experiencing disability.

The Framework includes essential competencies with examples of [entry-to-practice milestones](#). However, the examples are not exhaustive, and each user will need to apply the Framework to their own setting to identify all the entry-to-practice milestones relevant to their own context.


## Framework Development

This framework was co-produced through a multiphase process led by Drs. Alexandra Walters and Jennifer Tomasone in collaboration with a multidisciplinary consensus panel. The consensus panel included persons experiencing diverse disability, QEPs, industry partners, and researchers. The formative process included:

- An environmental scan of exercise provider training materials.<sup>1</sup>
- A scoping review of disability-specific learning opportunities for QEPs.<sup>2</sup>
- Semi-structured interviews with persons experiencing disability to explore their lived experiences working with QEPs.<sup>3</sup>
- A preliminary consensus process aimed at co-developing a scope and purpose statement and general framework structure.<sup>4</sup>

A draft version of this framework was developed from the findings in these research studies. This draft was then circulated to a working group of partners that filled in gaps and clarified the scope, values, and competencies.

Cross-referencing to existing, non-disability specific competency frameworks ensured language and content aligned with national and international QEPs standards.



The full consensus panel included a wide variety of partners: persons experiencing disability, QEPs, educators of QEPs, employers of QEPs, and representatives from QEP accreditation bodies. Over 217 partners representing these groups from across Canada offered feedback on the Framework before it was finalized.

The Framework uses a social relational model of disability. This model suggests that disability only comes into play when the restrictions of activity experienced by people with impairments are imposed by societal barriers – when they are completely social in origin rather than individually based.<sup>5</sup>

# The Full Framework: Essential Competencies for Qualified Exercise Professionals Working with Persons Experiencing Disability

## Scope and Purpose

The purpose of this competency framework is to provide guidance on the abilities required of **Qualified Exercise Professionals (QEPs) at [entry-to-practice](#)** to work with **persons experiencing disability** in a safe, welcoming, and inclusive manner in **community-based settings**.

In this framework, the essential competencies for practice are defined. These competencies should be used to guide what QEPs do when working with persons experiencing disability across training, hiring, advocacy, and self-assessment.

## Fundamental Values

These values are the foundation of the QEP competencies for working with persons experiencing disability. At entry-to-practice, QEPs have the ability and the responsibility to use their knowledge, skills and attitudes to inform their practice. The competent QEP centres the person they serve in their care, prioritizes the safety of the person they serve, works in partnership with the person they serve and others in the circle of care, and communicates openly and often.

These values are in accordance with the priorities of persons with lived experience of disability:

- **Person-centred care:** Each person experiencing disability is unique, demonstrating varying needs and preferences. One person experiencing disability will not always be like another person, even with the same disability. Persons experiencing disability have identities beyond their disability including those of diverse ages, races, genders, sexual orientations, cultures, classes, socioeconomic statuses, social capitals and others.
- **Safety of the person:** Safety is paramount and should always be prioritized over exercise completion. Safety is multi-dimensional and can include physical, psychological, and cultural components.
- **Work in partnership:** Persons experiencing disability have expertise on themselves, their multiple intersecting identities, and how exercise impacts their activities of daily living – follow their lead. QEPs have expertise on exercise prescription and counselling. You are working in partnership each bringing your own expertise. Use what you know about safe exercise principles while still honouring the person's experience.

- **Communication:** Ongoing and open communication ensures you capture the person's lived experience of disability. Be open to asking questions and learning about how a person experiences disability; a person's health condition may convey important information about contraindications to exercise, and their activity limitations may help you design an exercise program that suits their needs.

## Descriptions of Abilities Required of QEPs at Entry-to-Practice to Work with Persons Experiencing Disability

Note: CEP=Clinical Exercise Physiologist; CPT=Certified Personal Trainer; KIN=Kinesiologist; QEP=Qualified Exercise Professional. \*Indicates entry-to-practice milestone is appropriate for CEPs and KINs at entry-to-practice only.

### Domain 1: Guiding Considerations for Working with Persons Experiencing Disability

Essential Competency	Example Entry-to-Practice Milestones
Employ a person-centered approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify common health conditions and considerations for exercise prescription and training</li> <li>• Select appropriate activities that align with considerations for exercise prescription and training</li> <li>• Focus on person-centered care</li> <li>• Recognize considerations for supporting the person experiencing disability</li> <li>• Apply appropriate strategies to support the unique needs of the person experiencing disability</li> </ul>
Foster inclusive, professional relationships with the person experiencing disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe principles of inclusion</li> <li>• Adjust communication strategy based on the physical and social setting, and purpose of the interaction</li> </ul>

Essential Competency	Example Entry-to-Practice Milestones
Promote a safe, welcoming and inclusive exercise environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify elements of an inclusive social environment</li> <li>• Identify elements of an inclusive physical environment</li> <li>• Maintain a positive atmosphere in the exercise facility</li> <li>• Promote positive attitudes about disability and exercise</li> <li>• Foster an inclusive space for persons of all abilities</li> <li>• Recognize when trauma-informed care is required and know when to seek additional support</li> </ul>
Promote barrier-reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe multi-level barriers to exercise for persons experiencing disability</li> <li>• Adjust exercise approaches based on the physical, social, and attitudinal barriers to exercise that the person experiencing disability shares with you</li> <li>• Advocate for barrier reduction</li> </ul>
Use disability appropriate language and tone when communicating with persons experiencing disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use disability inclusive language</li> <li>• Practice empathy, understanding, and respect when communicating with persons experiencing disability</li> <li>• Value the importance of using disability inclusive language</li> </ul>

Essential Competency	Example Entry-to-Practice Milestones
Use communication methods tailored to the person experiencing disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply a person-centered approach to communication</li> <li>• Select the appropriate communication modality based on the person</li> <li>• Respect the person experiencing disability's use of alternative communication methods</li> </ul>

## Domain 2: Ensure Physical Safety

Essential Competency	Example Entry-to-Practice Milestones
Ensure the physical safety of the person experiencing disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify signs and symptoms of concern for terminating exercise</li> <li>• Identify relative and absolute contraindications to exercise</li> <li>• Recognize safe mobility practices</li> <li>• Be able to execute emergency plans</li> <li>• * Recognize medications commonly used for managing health conditions and their effects on exercise response</li> <li>• * Recall exercise considerations for health conditions</li> </ul>

Essential Competency	Example Entry-to-Practice Milestones
Plan and complete safe person support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate the proper use of common mobility aids (e.g. walkers, crutches, wheelchairs)</li> <li>• Be able to safely guide persons with visual impairments around different physical spaces</li> <li>• Complete a safe, minimal-assist transfer</li> <li>• * Complete a safe, moderate assist transfer</li> <li>• * Employ appropriate communication during transfers</li> </ul>
Include the use of mobility and assistive devices, where applicable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the function of mobility and assistive devices in the exercise environment</li> <li>• Know exercise considerations when using mobility and assistive devices</li> <li>• * Demonstrate the use of mobility and assistive devices in the exercise environment</li> <li>• Support the autonomy and self-management of the person experiencing disability by way of mobility and assistive devices usage</li> </ul>

### Domain 3: Complete Assessments and Reassessments

Essential Competency	Example Entry-to-Practice Milestones
Select and conduct assessments and re-assessments tailored to disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Perform exercise pre-participation screening and know when additional medical guidance is needed</li><li>• Select appropriate health and fitness assessments and/or re-assessments based on the goals, history and function of the person experiencing disability</li><li>• Execute safe health and fitness assessments and/or re-assessments</li><li>• Use appropriate physical cues when explaining differing types of health and fitness assessments and/or re-assessments</li></ul>

## Domain 4: Gather Information for Exercise Prescription and Counselling

Essential Competency	Example Entry-to-Practice Milestones
Use evidence informed exercise recommendations where available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recall and implement exercise guidelines and/or exercise prescription recommendations for persons experiencing disability</li> </ul>
Employ principles of exercise with the person experiencing disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recall principles of fitness and apply them to the person experiencing disability</li> <li>Define physical literacy</li> </ul>
Engage in physical activity counselling with the person experiencing disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discuss and establish physical activity goals with the person experiencing disability</li> <li>Explain benefits of physical activity for persons experiencing disability</li> <li>Refer to principles of fitness when discussing physical activity goals with the person experiencing disability</li> </ul>

## Domain 5: Design and Implement Inclusive Exercise Programs

Essential Competency	Example Entry-to-Practice Milestones
Plan, deliver, and evaluate inclusive exercise recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify examples of inclusive exercises</li> <li>• Instruct inclusive exercises</li> <li>• Apply principles of fitness to a person's inclusive exercise programs</li> <li>• Engage with the inclusive exercise community</li> <li>• Construct a program that targets mutually agreed-upon goals, promotes safe health management, and continued participation</li> </ul>
Implement inclusive exercises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know how to find information about inclusive sport opportunities</li> <li>• Explain and demonstrate how to adapt exercises to a variety of persons experiencing disability based on their abilities</li> <li>• Deliver proper cueing and coaching tips</li> <li>• Show how to progress, regress, modify, and offer alternative exercises</li> </ul>

## Domain 6: Professionalism

Essential Competency	Example Entry-to-Practice Milestones
Meet and maintain credentialing requirements and appropriate scope of practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Describe the roles and responsibilities of a QEP for persons experiencing disability</li><li>• Follow professional regulations, if they exist in your jurisdiction</li><li>• Work within the QEP scope of practice for persons experiencing disability</li><li>• Collaborate with other allied health professionals</li><li>• Model the professional role when working with persons experiencing disability</li><li>• Demonstrate professional etiquette when working with persons experiencing disability</li></ul>

# Glossary of Terms

## CSEP Certified Personal Trainer (CSEP-CPT)

A professional certification provided by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) for individuals to work with apparently healthy individuals, or those who live with a stable health condition and are able to exercise independently.<sup>6</sup> CSEP requires CSEP-CPTs to complete yearly professional development credits to maintain their certification.

## CSEP Clinical Exercise Physiologist (CSEP-CEP)

A professional certification provided by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) for individuals to perform assessments, prescribe conditioning exercise, as well as exercise supervision, counselling and healthy lifestyle education in apparently healthy individuals, asymptomatic individuals and/or populations with medical conditions, functional limitations or disabilities associated with musculoskeletal, cardiopulmonary, metabolic, neuromuscular, and aging conditions.<sup>6</sup> CSEP requires CSEP-CEPs to complete yearly professional development credits to maintain their certification.

## Core Competency

An integration of a learner's knowledge, skills, and attitudes for a particular task.<sup>7</sup>

## Disability

The dynamic interaction between an individual's experience of living with a condition or impairment and their environment. Disability, whether permanent, ongoing, episodic, or persistent – substantially limits their ability to perform life's important functions and interacts with environmental factors that influence their ability to participate fully in society. Disability may include (but is not limited to) physical, developmental, and/or sensory disability.<sup>8</sup>

## Entry-to-Practice

The point at which an individual demonstrates the observable competencies required to practice as a qualified exercise professional safely, effectively, and ethically. At entry-to-practice, the individual possesses the entry-level knowledge, skills, abilities, and professional judgment necessary to perform their role independently, without the need for direct supervision.<sup>9</sup>

## End Users

Individuals or groups that will use or benefit from the Framework. These groups may include but are not limited to persons experiencing disability, QEPs, educators of QEPs, employers of QEPs, and representatives from QEP accreditation bodies.<sup>10</sup>

## Entry-to-Practice Milestone

The building blocks that a learner would work towards when achieving a competency. As each setting in which a core competency is taught and applied varies, it is impossible to quantify all of the entry-to-practice milestones for each core competency. Instead, this framework provides several example entry-to-practice milestones to help users of this framework conceptualize how they may develop entry-to-practice milestones for their individual context.

## Inclusive

An inclusive environment is one where people have both the feeling and reality of belonging, where they can participate in ways that are meaningful to them, and where the activity contributes to them reaching their full potential. It involves understanding, accepting and respecting diversity and actively involving people from the diverse groups represented within the community. Relevant and appropriate policies and services are developed and implemented, and there is an organizational commitment to eliminating barriers.<sup>11</sup>

## Kinesiologist

Kinesiologists work with people of all ages and physical abilities, in many settings, to help them achieve their health and wellness goals. “Kinesiologists apply exercise and movement science to promote health and well-being; prevent, manage, and rehabilitate injuries; treat illness and chronic disease; restore function; and optimize human performance in the workplace, clinical settings, sport, and fitness”. The title of a Kinesiologist may differ from province to province. In some provinces (Ontario) Kinesiologists are regulated health professionals, and the term Kinesiologist can only be used by registered members.<sup>12</sup>

## Persons

The term used to describe any individual, group, or population who participates in and benefits from exercise and health services. The term “persons” was chosen over “patient” and “client” due to the power and commodity implications of these terms.

## Qualified Exercise Professionals (QEPs)

Experts in health promotion and lifestyle behaviour modification who are responsible for employing evidence-informed exercise prescription and counselling to apparently healthy individuals and/or populations. They may include Certified Personal Trainers (CPTs), Clinical Exercise Physiologists (CEPs), and kinesiologists.

## Safe

“A safe environment is a positive space that promotes consent-based participation and all participants' physical, emotional and social development and well-being. It is free from abuse, maltreatment, misconduct, bullying, harassment and hazing, and involves treating all participants with dignity”.<sup>11</sup>

## Welcoming

“A welcoming environment has a culture that ensures everyone involved in, or participating in, your [exercise] is made to feel actively encouraged, included, and valued. It involves actively seeking to understand and remove barriers to full and meaningful participation and bridges the gap for people who may have previously felt excluded. These changes help to ensure that [exercise] is seen as more appealing to potential [persons you serve]”.<sup>11</sup>

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