

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNERS

As a tutor, you should be aware of the characteristics of adult learners. You may find that you share some of these same attributes as you go through new learning experiences yourself, such as this training. No one adult tutor or student has all the characteristics listed, but reviewing them may help you be aware of them as you clarify goals and plan individual lessons.

There is no typical adult learner. Adult literacy programs have both male and female students whose ages may range from 16 to 80 plus. The student population reflects the general population. Students come from various ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds and may represent all the possible family structures existing in the community. School experience will range from none to twelve or more years. Some may hold responsible jobs, while others are unemployed. Some have stable home lives while others are burdened with social problems. But two things are certain: they want to improve their reading and writing, and they need your help.

CREATIVITY AND ADAPTABILITY

The inability to read and write does not necessarily indicate a lack of intelligence. Many nonreaders are intelligent and creative in finding ways to compensate for the lack of proficiency in literacy. As one student commented, “I don’t have trouble thinking. My trouble is just reading.”

Adult students differ from children in many ways, especially in their range of life experiences. Personality, habits, attitudes, and interests have solidified to a far greater degree than in children, sometimes making adults comparatively more rigid and less receptive to change. But most adults know better what they want from educational encounters, have rich personal experiences on which to build, and can be motivated to try different approaches.

Adult learners are not blank slates. They, like all other students, have had failures. However, they also have unique talents and have had successes in some areas of life—family, church, neighborhood, or job. They simply do not have the strategies for reading and writing that they need and want. They need to be encouraged to use the adaptability and creativity they have demonstrated in other areas of their lives to develop greater proficiency with reading and writing.

APPREHENSION OR ANXIETY

Basic literacy students, like other adults going into new ventures, may very well face the experience with much hesitancy and apprehension. They may be thinking: “Am I capable of learning after all these years? Can you teach an old dog new tricks? I’ve failed so many times. Will this be another failure? Will my friends find out?”

Some adults do not show up for their first meeting with the tutor. Sometimes, on reflection, they decide not to go through with the lessons. Sometimes an unexpected problem arises, such as the sickness of a child. Or perhaps the problem is with transportation. There are also adults who have trouble facing new experiences; the unknown can be very frightening. It takes a great deal of courage to admit needs

and to ask for assistance, and some adults cannot muster the courage to attend the first meeting.

What about you? You are the tutor. You have been trained to teach and have been told about your students in advance. Do you think you will have butterflies in your stomach when you go to your first tutoring session? Think how much more frightening this experience can be for students who have little, if any, awareness of what to expect.

UNEVEN LEARNING

Because of each adult's unique history and experience, learning cycles may be unpredictable and uneven throughout your teaching sessions.

Have you ever had a day when you could do nothing wrong, only to have it followed by a day when you could do nothing right? This up-and-down, uneven pace is natural to all learning. Some days, your students may learn quite easily, and you will feel a buoyancy about your progress. But, at other times, cues will be missed, reading will drag, and writing will just not flow. You may feel a particular student is not trying, especially if a forgetful or dull day follows a good one.

Uneven learning results from the nature of the learners and from the task itself. Don't be too upset with yourself or your learners if an occasional lesson seems unproductive. Your students may be able to do some things you think are quite complex and at the same time not be able to do things you judge as simple.

But you must be aware that many adults who come for literacy help have real learning differences. Your literacy program coordinator can help decide if those students should be referred elsewhere.

OUTSIDE RESPONSIBILITIES

Like all adults, nonreaders sometimes have problems not directly related to their inability to read and write. Some have domestic difficulties that cause them to have feelings of hopelessness. Their problems, like yours, are varied and sometimes serious. However, they must face these problems without the ease of access to information that literacy provides.

If students are disturbed by a sick child, a lost job, or domestic difficulties, they may find it difficult to concentrate on reading and writing. You cannot solve all their problems, but you can listen, ask constructive questions, and perhaps direct them to the appropriate agencies. You can also use these home situations as the source of writing and reading materials for instruction.

Many people who do not read or write are able to cope with life to their own satisfaction. They might trade off their practical skills with others who do their reading and writing for them. They are usually part of a family, neighborhood, work, or religious network and have other responsibilities to deal with in addition to attending tutoring sessions. As they increase their proficiencies with reading and writing, their place in the network often changes. These changes may be positive or they may become obstacles which will have to be dealt with.

Even time scheduled for lessons and home study may vary since all adult learners have lives with various commitments outside the literacy lessons. Most have responsibilities for the basic needs of their families, often necessitating overtime work or second jobs.

ADDITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Adult learners generally view themselves as responsible, self-directed, and independent, preferring to make their own decisions. They resent being treated like children and often feel threatened by formal tests. Many adult students are impatient regarding their own progress. Some will enjoy reading for pleasure and writing about their own experiences; for others, however, the most immediate needs will be for practical lessons that will satisfy their personal goals. Most adults seem to learn better in informal settings.

Of course, not all these characteristics apply to all adult learners, but being sensitive to your students' experiences and expectations will help you create a relaxed atmosphere as you plan together.

Your students may wonder what you are getting out of the tutoring experience. When they find that you are a volunteer—that you are teaching because you sincerely care and want to help—a new understanding of the collaborative tutoring partnership often results.

CHECKLIST



Characteristics of Adult Learners

Most Adult Learners:

- ◆ Are creative and adaptable.
- ◆ Are apprehensive or anxious.
- ◆ Learn unevenly.
- ◆ Have outside responsibilities beyond tutoring sessions.
- ◆ View themselves as responsible, self-directed, independent.
- ◆ Prefer to make their own decisions.
- ◆ Resent being treated like children.
- ◆ Are threatened by formal tests.
- ◆ Want practical lessons, satisfying personal goals.
- ◆ Have had varied life experiences.