

Adult Learners

Teens and young adults bring years of life experience to the classroom. More often than not, they have a choice about whether to come and they know what they will gain by participating in an educational experience. To make the Keeping Babies Safe presentations as beneficial as possible, presenters must understand and respect the characteristics and needs of adult learners. Here are some suggestions for making the session you lead appropriate for the adults and teens who attend them:

Adult learners want to know what is expected of them. Share objectives early and express expectations positively. Be guided by your participants during teaching. Continually observe their reactions, acknowledge them and modify teaching when needed.

Build on what participants know. Some people in the class may know something about the subject being discussed in a session. Encourage them to share their knowledge and relate it to the information you want to discuss with the class. It is important to actively engage adult learners because they are less likely to gain much in a passive classroom environment. Allow time during the classes for questions.

Stick to information participants need to know. Adult and teen learners are more likely to retain information when they see how they will use it in making decisions in their day-to-day lives. The Safe Babies presentations cover practical information that pregnant women, parents and caregivers need to know to keep infant and young children safe. When implementing sessions, facilitators must be careful not to allow discussions to digress, or to be tempted to discuss theory at any length. Be sensitive to the various levels of education among your students. Use clear and concise language. Always avoid medical jargon.

Ask participants to reflect on the issues and activities in each session. When participants do an activity or take part in a discussion, they should take the time to analyze what they've learned or experienced and how this affects them. Through this process, adults can discover meaning for themselves in the activity or discussion that will be more relevant to their lives than anything a facilitator can tell them. This discovery of one's feelings leads an adult to make life changes.

Respect participants' time. Start and end presentations on time, and make sure every moment of the event is used productively. Adults and teens have many responsibilities and concerns in addition to attending Safe Babies presentations. If you waste their time, they won't value the presentations.

Recognize that adults have something real to lose in a classroom. When adults are asked to participate in front of their peers, they put their self-esteem and ego on the line. Some students may have had bad experiences in a traditional classroom and negative feelings toward authority, which can impact their level of comfort in class. One strategy is to ask questions that draw from the participants' experiences rather than having questions that have "right" or "wrong" answers.

Seating setup can affect comfort level. Traditional classroom seating (desks placed in rows) tends to discourage discussion and creates an unbalanced situation where the instructor is lecturing to participants. Seating around a table or in a circle allows all participants to face each

other and be on an equal level. It also promotes sharing and permits the presenter to integrate him/herself into the group.

The presenter should be sensitive to the minority opinion of the class. Work to keep disagreements from spiraling out of hand. Try to make connections between various opinions and ideas.

If you are having trouble facilitating a discussion, or you tend to hold back as a presenter, you can compensate by asking the class open-ended questions to get your students talking about their relevant knowledge and experience.

The best facilitators understand this simple rule: **In adult education, the goal is not just to put ideas into people's heads, but also to draw ideas out.**

About Cultural Sensitivity

Culture does not refer exclusively to ethnicity or race. Culture is made up of history and beliefs that influence how a group functions. It is important to recognize the distinction between “societal culture” from “home culture.” Societal culture is made up of many institutions such as educational systems, political systems, religious systems and the media that contribute to the group's value system. Home culture is made of the values of the immediate family. Sometimes, home culture can conflict with the societal culture. The cultural practice of arranged marriages is just one example. As health care instructors, you should be sensitive to the tensions between home culture and societal culture. Balancing the two cultures can be challenging for new parents who are interacting with new institutions and value systems.

Healthy Babies presenters need to recognize that women who come from a variety of cultures may attend sessions. Presenters must strive to be as sensitive as possible to the different beliefs values and practices they encounter. Cultural groups vary in their customs related to puberty, menstruation, sex and sex roles, family planning and childbearing, among other things. For example in some Asian cultures, women prefer to be treated only by female physicians. Some Latin American cultures discourage pregnant women from hanging clothes on a clothes line for fear that this motion will cause the baby's umbilical cord to tighten around its neck.

Not only are there differences between groups, but also there are major differences within groups. Diversity includes not only different ethnic groups, but also generation, language, length of time in the United States, age, gender, educational level, immigration experience, access to resources, physical challenges, etc. You will also find, however, that many people hold common beliefs and practices. It is important to respect the differences and build on the similarities.

There may be some unique cultural differences in your group that relate to parenting and caregiving. If participants are willing to share them, try to have an open and nonjudgmental discussion about the differences. If something is mentioned that may be unhealthy or even dangerous, be sure to clarify the misinformation in a tactful and respectful way.

Here are some cultural sensitivity tips to keep in mind as you teach:

1. Take the initiative to make contact with your students even if language is a problem at first.
2. Show respect for their culture and language. They may feel uncomfortable among people who do not share their cultural views. Ask yourself, "How would I feel if I were in their shoes?"
3. Learn how to pronounce names correctly. Their name is as important to them as yours is to you. Practice saying it until you get close to how it should be pronounced.
4. If they have recently immigrated to the United States, be sensitive to their feelings about their homeland. Developing nations are not as poor, backward or uneducated as North Americans tend to think.
5. When speaking, do so slowly and clearly. Remember, raising your voice does not make English more understandable.
6. Be yourself. Show that you care about them as people and that you honestly want to help.
7. Take time to listen. If you don't understand, or you are not understood, take time to find out why. Explain or ask questions. A key question might be, "Would you help me understand?"
8. Be careful about promises. In English, we express the subjunctive (possibility, probability or contingency) in a way that is sometimes misunderstood by internationals.
9. Don't allow cultural differences (preferences) to become the basis for criticism and judgments. Differences are neither good nor bad. Respect the differences and build on the similarities.
10. As an instructor, you should remember that different cultures define "family" in different ways. Some include "extended" family members (i.e. aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins) or close family friends in the decision making and day-to-day functioning of the family.

For Further Reading:

Ontai L, Mastergeorge AM. "Culture and Parenting: A Guide to Delivering Parenting Curriculums to Diverse Families." University of California. Downloaded 7/25/06 from:
www.ucce.ucdavis.edu/files/filelibrary/5264/20355.pdf .

Zemke R, Zemke S. "30 Things We Know for Sure About Adult Learning." From: *Innovation Abstracts* Vol VI, No 8, March 9, 1984. Accessed 7/25/06 from:
www.honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults-3.htm

"Adult Learning Styles: Practical Classroom Tips" University of California Davis. Accessed on 7/25/06 from:
www.ucd.ie/adulted/resources/pages/ad_le_sty_tips.htm

Source: Text adapted from The Stork's Nest Curriculum from the March of Dimes and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.