

Adult Learning Principles

What Are Adult Learning Principles?

Various theories and models have been developed and researched to understand and describe how adults learn. Different models have different areas of emphasis but there is general consensus about the central principles. In our work we focus on **5 adult learning principles**¹.

Adult Learning Principle #1: Adults need to know why they are learning

When adults have a reason for learning we spend more time and energy doing so. Identifying or helping learners identify and articulate compelling reasons to fully engage in the learning process will motivate and inspire greater learning.

Adult Learning Principle #2: Adults are motivated to learn by the need to solve problems

When adults have a specific problem to solve or challenge they face they are more eager and ready to learn. As with the first principle, identifying or helping learners identify specific problems or challenges that the content will help them address can improve motivation and learning.

Adult Learning Principle #3: Adults' previous experience must be respected and built upon

Adults bring personal and professional experience into the learning environment. Relating new content to the knowledge they already have can improve the learning process. Identifying, acknowledging, and validating learners' past experiences is valuable for adult learning.

Adult Learning Principle #4: Adults need learning approaches that match their background and diversity

Adults have a broad range of life and learning experiences. Therefore, as a group they are more diverse in their interests and preferred learning styles. Using multiple methods, representing different perspectives, contextualizing content in various ways, and knowing when each is appropriate for the group will create a more effective learning experience.

Adult Learning Principle #5: Adults need to be actively involved in the learning process

Adults prefer to control their learning and are often self-directed. Rigid environments can inhibit adults' motivation to learn. Giving adults the opportunity to become stakeholders in the learning process by allowing them to have some control over the content and methods can improve motivation and learning.

How Do I Apply Adult Learning Principles to My Mothers and Babies Training?

Adult Learning Principle #1: Adults need to know why they are learning

- Ask: What knowledge do you hope to gain from this training and how will it contribute to your professional goals and help you carry out your job responsibilities?
- Discuss current job responsibilities, personal and organizational goals and priorities as well as constraints and obstacles to achieving goals and priorities.
- Make explicit how training objectives will address learners' reason for attending the training and demonstrate how a given activity will address different learner and training goals.

Adult Learning Principle #2: Adults are motivated to learn by the need to solve problems

- Ask: What problem(s) or challenge(s) do you expect this training will help you address?
- Problems may vary for participants so identifying broader problem themes that capture a range of challenges reported by learners will be useful. Themes that may be relevant are working with clients who are depressed, stressed, and lack social support.
- Build learning experiences around real problems facing the trainees. This creates a more learner-centered environment and trainees will more likely engage, participate, and share, facilitating greater learning.

Adult Learning Principle #3: Adults' previous experience must be respected and built upon

- Ask: What do you know from past experiences or local data about postpartum depression and stress in new moms? What challenges have you faced working to address this? How did you overcome those challenges?
- Use experiential learning to take advantage of learners' previous experiences with depression and stress such as case studies, discussions, local data, and examples related to their previous experience.

Adult Learning Principle #4: Adults need learning approaches that match their background and diversity

- Ask: How do you like to learn? Which learning styles work best for you? Do you learn better by listening and watching or doing? Do you learn better working alone or in a group?
- Utilize different training approaches that vary across training content and learning styles.

Adult Learning Principle #5: Adults need to be actively involved in the learning process

- Ask: What do you need to learn to achieve the goals of the training? If you were responsible for planning the training, what would you include and how would you deliver it?
- Create a participatory learning environment by utilizing the suggested group activities and discussion questions. This allows learners to adopt their preferred level of autonomy and self-direct their learning, giving them control over the pace and direction.