

Principles of Adult Education

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The principles of adult education are quite different from the ideas that are commonly used to teach children in schools. Applying school teaching methods to bring about change in a group of adults will rarely result in successful or long lasting changes. This section will describe how and why adults learn and how these principles can be applied to improve the effectiveness of training sessions. However, the points described here are not only relevant to trainers working with extension workers or community vaccinators but should also be applied by extensionists and vaccinators working with rural families.

1. Learning starts with a need and desire to learn. Something may arouse our interest, or we may come across something we don't know how to solve. This focuses our mind on a particular problem and we become open to think and act differently to solve that problem. The greater our need or desire to learn, the greater will be our motivation.
2. Once we are ready to learn the next step is to collect information about how to solve the problem. We may do this by asking questions, talking to others, reading, observing and relating all of this information to the problem.
3. While we are collecting information, we will start testing our new knowledge to see if it helps solve the problem. We relate the information to past experience and try applying that information to solving the problem.
4. As we go through the process of collecting and testing information, we gradually build up new knowledge and understanding.
5. At this stage we have integrated past experience and new learning to arrive at a new level of knowledge about a particular problem. The final step is when we apply the knowledge about a particular problem to other situations. We generalise our particular knowledge to fit in with other uses and situations.

In summary, a need or desire leads to motivation to solve a problem. We then collect and test information to develop new knowledge and understanding about that problem. Finally, we generalise our knowledge to apply to other situations.

Three important principles

The adult learning process incorporates three important principles that should be remembered when running a training session.

1. Adults bring a lot of experience with them to training sessions and they therefore have something to contribute and something to lose.

2. Adults prefer to focus on real life, immediate problems rather than on theoretical situations.
3. Adults are accustomed to being active and self-directing.

Each of these principles encompass a number of points, which then lead to some suggestions for running effective training programs. These points and suggestions are listed below:

1. Adults bring a lot of experience with them to training sessions and they therefore have something to contribute and something to lose.

- Adult learning is unique to each individual. Everyone learns at their own pace and in their own way
- Adults value their own experience and don't want to be treated as stupid or ignorant
- You cannot force an adult to change.

Suggested practices:

- Adults want to test what they learn with what they already know. Encourage them to answer questions from their own experience.
- Don't just present information as 'truth'. Use people's different experiences to encourage questioning and discussion so that they can arrive at the truth for themselves.
- Adults don't want to risk looking stupid. Treat everyone equally and respect their input and ideas. If someone makes a mistake treat it as a means to create discussion and so enable learning.
- For learning to occur, material has to be provided in manageable steps. Adults need to understand as they learn and gradually come to master a task.
- Adults want feedback on their progress and how they can improve. However, don't be overly critical, as positive reinforcement is also needed when you are first trying out a new task.

2. Adults prefer to focus on real life, immediate problems rather than on theoretical situations

- Adults see learning as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself
- Learning is voluntary. Adults only learn what they want to learn and do what they want to do. What they learn must have personal meaning and be of direct or immediate value.

Suggested practices:

- Provide useful information that is relevant to their needs. Adults would rather focus on current issues, rather than material that may be useful in the distant future.
- Tell adults about the purpose and benefits of the session, and about the process you intend to follow. That way they will know what's in it for them.
- Summarise and review regularly so they can see that progress is being made.

3. Adults are accustomed to being active and self-directing

- The best learning is based on experience
- Most adults like to work with others. Aim for a cooperative process that supports sharing of experiences

Suggested practices:

- Participation needs to be encouraged, supported and expected. Don't embarrass them, but don't let them hide either.
- For learning to occur, adults have to do things. They must get involved and work at tasks and exercises. They learn by doing and making mistakes and then discovering solutions for themselves.
- Adults want to be consulted and listened to. Although trainers need to give direction at times, this should be the exception rather than the rule.

In summary, treat adult learners with respect. Encourage discussion and participation. Rather than being the 'teacher' with all the answers, try and be the facilitator who helps them to learn for themselves. Both you and they will then have a much more rewarding and enjoyable training session.

Reference

Klatt, B. (1999) "The Ultimate Training Workshop Handbook: A comprehensive guide to leading successful workshops and training programs." McGraw-Hill, New York.