

Understanding and Teaching Adults

A counselor in a ward Relief Society often needed to ask sisters to substitute for the regularly called teachers. She was a little surprised at their hesitancy when she asked them. They said that they felt inadequate teaching so many women who, they were sure, knew more and were better prepared to teach than they.

You too may have felt inadequate in a calling to teach adults. You may have worried not only about the seemingly superior knowledge and experience of many of those you teach, but also about the wide differences between them. Often, adult class members differ greatly in their occupations, education, Church experience, family challenges, knowledge of scriptures, confidence level, and spiritual development. This can make it challenging to see how to prepare material that will be interesting and meaningful for all of them. But you can use these differing characteristics and experiences—the very attributes that may have led you to feel inadequate—to enhance the lessons you teach.

You can magnify your calling as a teacher by using the many strengths of those you teach. You can draw on their insights and experience. You can plan lessons so they will be able to learn from one another. You do not need to have all the answers or hold class members spellbound by your presentation; these are not requirements to be an effective gospel teacher. Instead, you need to be humble, diligent, prayerful, and anxious to have class members contribute to lessons. As you go forward in this spirit, the Lord will enable you to turn your worry about your inadequacies into reliance on Him. He will magnify your efforts, give you peace, and prompt those you teach to enrich class discussions. The Lord grants us a special measure of inspiration when we gather to study the gospel.

Common Characteristics of Adult Learners

As you seek to draw on the strengths and insights of the adults you teach, be aware of the characteristics they have in common. Most adult learners share the following characteristics.

They Need to Feel That They Are Loved and Respected and Are Contributing Something of Value

The need to be loved and respected is not outgrown with age, and neither is the desire to make a meaningful contribution. An understanding of these needs will motivate you to listen to and value the ideas of those you teach. Respectfully consider all ideas offered by class members, and express gratitude for their sincere contributions. Be careful not to embarrass anyone in the class. Avoid sarcasm and demeaning humor.

They Want to Learn by the Spirit

Adults bring to class a rich resource of experiences. Many have learned in their own lives the power of true principles, and they can bear testimony of how the gospel has blessed them. Because of the trials and joys they have experienced, they feel a great need to understand the gospel and receive guidance from the Spirit.

They Want to Talk about How the Gospel Applies in Their Lives

Adults can contribute personal insights they have gained through practicing their beliefs and pondering the scriptures. They can teach and strengthen one another as they share experiences. Invite them to share their experiences during discussions. Help them understand and discuss how the principles you are studying can make a positive difference in their individual lives and in the lives of their family members.

They Desire to Be Self-Directed

Adults want to take responsibility for learning the gospel. You should use teaching methods that will help them do so (see “Helping Individuals Take Responsibility for Learning the Gospel,” pages 61–62). Encourage them to complete reading assignments in preparation for lessons. Invite them to come to class prepared to ask questions and share insights and experiences.

One Gospel Doctrine teacher regularly invited class members to use the first five minutes of class to share insights or inspiration they had gained through their personal scripture study during the week. These experiences invited the Spirit and encouraged other class members to be more diligent learners. The comments often provided effective introductions to the lessons.

They Are Concerned about Their Family Responsibilities

Adults want to find solutions to the challenges they face in their families. They are anxious to learn how gospel principles apply to these challenges, and they are interested in others’ insights and experiences. Discussions on such subjects are a good use of the time you spend studying the gospel together.

An elders quorum instructor was teaching a lesson based on “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” A member of the quorum had read part of the proclamation, and the instructor was about to move forward with the lesson. Then another quorum member raised his hand. “I have a question,” he said. Quoting a phrase from the proclamation, he asked, “How do we teach our children ‘to love and serve one another’?” This led to a valuable discussion in which quorum members shared practical ways to apply the principle.

We begin to realize the significance of the call to teach adult classes when we see how adults share what they learn—particularly when they share it with their families.

In one high priests group, the instructor taught a lesson about missionary work. As part of the lesson, he conducted a discussion about the need for older couples to serve missions. Many of the brethren had served missions as young men or later in life with their wives, and some of them testified of the responsibilities and blessings of such service.

One member of the high priests group returned home and told his wife about the discussion. The two of them had been satisfied with the contribution they were making to the lives of their family members. But the words and spirit of that lesson began to work in their hearts. Less than two months later, they spoke in sacrament meeting before leaving to serve for 18 months in another country. With emotion, the husband expressed appreciation for the high priests group instructor and the influence of that lesson on his decision. He said that he knew the decision to serve a mission would be a blessing in his life and the lives of his family members.

Working with Individual Differences

Adults vary widely in their experiences and abilities. Some know the scriptures well; some are quick with answers; some need a longer time to ponder a question; some hesitate to volunteer even though they have much to say; some have difficulty reading. By thinking about these differences carefully, you can plan learning activities that will help all class members participate.

You can teach a diverse group more effectively if you get to know them as individuals and adapt your teaching to their needs and interests (see “Understanding Those You Teach,” pages 33–34). It is especially important to encourage the participation of new converts, less-active members, members who are new in the ward, and young adults just leaving their Aaronic Priesthood quorum or Young Women class. These members have experiences and insights, but they may be hesitant to share them.