2.12 CHILD VS ADULT LEARNING DIFFERENCES

Child learning often relies on exploration, play, and guided instruction to build foundational skills, with a strong dependence on external motivation. In contrast, adult learning is typically self-directed, goal-oriented, and driven by internal motivation and prior experiences.

PREPARED BY:

The CPD Standards Office

PART OF:

Training Providers Support Documents

Child learning refers to the process through which children acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours as they grow and develop. It encompasses a broad range of experiences, including formal education in schools, informal learning through play and exploration, and social interactions with caregivers, peers, and the environment.

Child learning is characterised by developmental stages and milestones, as children progress from infancy through childhood and adolescence. It involves various cognitive, emotional, social, and physical processes that shape children's understanding of the world and their ability to navigate it.

Adult learning, on the other hand, refers to the process of acquiring new knowledge, skills, or competencies by individuals who have reached maturity and are typically beyond formal schooling age. Unlike child learning, which often occurs in structured educational settings such as schools, adult learning can take place in a variety of contexts, including formal education programs, workplace training, self-directed study, and informal learning opportunities.

Adult learners bring their life experiences, prior knowledge, and individual learning styles to the learning process, which may influence how they engage with and assimilate new information. Adult learning is often driven by personal or professional goals, career advancement, or a desire for personal enrichment and lifelong learning.

The main differences between child learning and adult learning lie in the learners' characteristics, motivations, and learning environments. Here are some key distinctions:

- **Developmental Stage:** Child learning occurs during the formative years of childhood and adolescence when individuals are still developing physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially. Adult learning takes place in individuals who have reached maturity and have fully developed cognitive abilities and life experiences.

- **Motivation:** Children often learn through natural curiosity, exploration, and play, driven by intrinsic motivation and the need to understand the world around them. In contrast, adult learners are typically motivated by more specific goals, such as career advancement, personal development, or acquiring new skills to address practical needs.

- **Learning Styles:** Child learning may involve more experiential and hands-on activities, with a focus on sensory exploration and concrete experiences. Adult learners may prefer more self-directed and independent learning approaches, drawing on their existing knowledge and applying it to real-world contexts.

- **Educational Environment:** Child learning often occurs in structured educational settings such as schools, preschools, and daycare centres, where teachers or caregivers provide guidance and support. Adult learning can take place in a variety of settings, including formal education institutions, workplace training programs, online courses, and community-based learning opportunities.

- **Prior Knowledge and Experience:** Child learners are relatively new to the world and have limited prior knowledge and experience upon which to build. Adult learners, on the other hand, bring a wealth of life experiences, skills, and knowledge to the learning process, which can influence their approach to learning and their ability to connect new information to existing knowledge.

- **Responsibility for Learning:** Children often rely on adults, such as parents, teachers, or caregivers, to facilitate their learning and provide guidance. Adult learners take greater responsibility for their own learning, making decisions about what, when, and how they learn, and actively seeking out resources and opportunities to meet their learning needs.

To win over your training participants and make it enjoyable for adult learners, consider implementing the following strategies:

Engage Learners from the Start: Begin your training with a compelling and relevant introduction that grabs participants' attention and highlights the value of the content they will learn. Use storytelling, provocative questions, or interactive activities to spark interest and curiosity.

Foster a Positive Learning Environment: Create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere where participants feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, asking questions, and sharing experiences. Encourage collaboration and peer interaction to facilitate a sense of community among learners.

Make it Relevant and Practical: Align the training content with participants' interests, goals, and real-world needs. Emphasise the practical applications of the material and provide examples, case studies, and scenarios that resonate with learners' experiences and professional contexts.

➡ **Incorporate Varied Learning Activities:** Integrate a mix of learning activities and instructional methods to accommodate different learning preferences and styles. Include interactive exercises, group discussions, case studies, simulations, role-plays, multimedia presentations, and hands-on activities to keep participants engaged and actively involved in the learning process.

➡ **Encourage Active Participation:** Promote active learning by giving participants opportunities to apply new concepts and skills through problem-solving tasks, decision-making exercises, and application-oriented activities. Encourage critical thinking, reflection, and peer-to-peer feedback to deepen understanding and retention.

➡ **Provide Opportunities for Self-Reflection:** Incorporate reflective exercises and journaling prompts that encourage participants to reflect on their learning, connect new information to prior knowledge, and consider how they can apply it in their personal or professional lives.

➡ **Offer Flexibility and Choice:** Allow participants some autonomy and flexibility in their learning journey by offering options for exploring topics of interest, choosing learning pathways, or selecting project topics. Tailor the training experience to accommodate different learning paces and preferences.

➡ **Use Technology Thoughtfully:** Integrate technology tools and platforms to enhance learning experiences, facilitate communication, and provide access to resources. Leverage interactive multimedia, online forums, virtual collaboration tools, and mobile apps to supplement in-person or virtual training sessions.

➡ **Provide Timely Feedback and Support:** Offer constructive feedback and guidance to participants throughout the training to reinforce learning objectives, address misconceptions, and celebrate achievements. Be responsive to learners' questions, concerns, and individual learning needs.

➡ **End on a High Note:** Wrap up your training with a meaningful and inspiring conclusion that reinforces key takeaways, highlights participants' accomplishments, and encourages continued learning and growth. Express gratitude for participants' engagement and contributions, and invite them to share feedback and reflections on their learning journey.

By incorporating these strategies into your training approach, you can create a dynamic and engaging learning experience that resonates with adult learners and fosters their motivation, curiosity, and enthusiasm for learning.

To ensure effective adult learning in training courses, here are some "to do" and "not to do" guidelines:

Do:

- **Do Foster a Collaborative Learning Environment:** Encourage interaction, collaboration, and peer-to-peer learning among participants.

- **Do Make Learning Relevant and Applicable:** Align training content with participants' interests, goals, and real-world applications.

- **Do Incorporate Active Learning Techniques:** Include hands-on activities, group discussions, case studies, and problem-solving exercises to engage participants.

- **Do Provide Opportunities for Reflection:** Encourage learners to reflect on their experiences, connect new knowledge to prior learning, and consider implications for their work.

- **Do Offer Choice and Flexibility:** Provide options for learners to explore topics of interest, select learning pathways, or engage in self-directed study.

- **Do Provide Timely and Constructive Feedback:** Offer feedback that is specific, actionable, and supportive to help learners improve and grow.

- **Do Use Varied Instructional Methods:** Mix lectures with interactive activities, multimedia presentations, and experiential learning opportunities to cater to diverse learning styles.

- **Do Respect Learners' Experiences and Expertise:** Acknowledge and leverage participants' existing knowledge, skills, and experiences as valuable assets in the learning process.

- **Do Encourage Self-Directed Learning:** Empower learners to take ownership of their learning journey and pursue further exploration and study outside of formal training sessions.

- **Do Create a Safe and Inclusive Learning Environment:** Foster an atmosphere of respect, openness, and acceptance where all participants feel valued and heard.

Don't:

- **Don't Lecture Exclusively:** Avoid relying solely on traditional lecture formats without opportunities for active engagement and participation.

- **Don't Overwhelm Learners with Information:** Avoid presenting too much content at once, and prioritise key concepts and skills that are most relevant and impactful.

- **Don't Disregard Individual Learning Styles:** Avoid assuming that all learners have the same preferences or abilities; instead, accommodate diverse learning styles and preferences.

- **Don't Neglect Feedback and Assessment:** Avoid neglecting opportunities for learners to receive feedback on their progress and performance, and to assess their own learning outcomes.

- **Don't Underestimate Prior Knowledge and Experience:** Avoid overlooking participants' prior knowledge and experiences, and failing to build upon them in the training curriculum.

- **Don't Ignore Learners' Needs and Preferences:** Avoid disregarding learners' preferences, needs, or concerns; instead, seek to understand and address them to enhance engagement and satisfaction.

- **Don't Rush Through Material:** Avoid rushing through content or attempting to cover too much ground in a limited time frame, which can lead to superficial understanding and retention.

- **Don't Be Unresponsive to Learner Feedback:** Avoid dismissing or ignoring learner feedback; instead, use it as valuable input to improve future training sessions and learning experiences.

- **Don't Assume Passive Learning Leads to Understanding:** Avoid assuming that passive listening or observation alone leads to deep understanding or retention; actively engage learners in the learning process.

- **Don't Overlook Opportunities for Reflection:** Avoid neglecting opportunities for learners to reflect on their learning experiences, make connections, and apply new knowledge in meaningful ways.

By adhering to these "to do" and "not to do" guidelines, trainers can create more effective and engaging learning experiences for adult learners in training courses.