

Are you interested in what the experts have to say about the adult learner?

Mostly, they are very divided. Much of the controversy seems to be about the definition of "adult learner." A widely accepted definition comes from Arthur Chickering, from the National Commission on Higher Education and the Adult Learner, which defines "Adult Learner" as an individual whose major role in life is something other than full-time student.

Here are some general characteristics of adult learners as compared to children:

CHILDHOOD	ADULTHOOD
Children depend upon adults for material support, psychological support, and life management. They are other-directed.	Adults depend upon themselves for material support and life management. Although they must still meet many psychological needs through others, they are largely self-directed.
Children perceive one of their major roles in life to be that of learner.	Adults perceive themselves to be doers; using previous learning to achieve success as workers, parents, etc.
Children, to a large degree, learn what they are told to learn.	Adults learn best when they perceive the outcomes of the learning process as valuable--contributing to their own development, work success, etc.
Children view the established learning content as important because adults tell them it is important.	Adults often have very different ideas about what is important to learn.
Children, as a group within educational settings, are much alike. They're approximately the same age, come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, etc.	Adults are very different from each other. Adult learning groups are likely to be composed of persons of many different ages, backgrounds, education levels, etc.
Children actually perceive time differently than older people do. Our perception of time changes as we age--time seems to pass more quickly as we get older.	Adults, in addition to perceiving time itself differently than children do, also are more concerned about the effective use of time.
Children have a limited experience base.	Adults have a broad, rich experience base to which to relate new learning.
Children generally learn quickly.	Adults, for the most part, learn more slowly than children, but they learn just as well.
Children are open to new information and will readily adjust their views.	Adults are much more likely to reject or explain away new information that contradicts their beliefs.
Children's readiness to learn is linked to both academic development and biological development.	Adults' readiness to learn is more directly linked to need--needs related to fulfilling their roles as workers, spouses, parents, etc. and coping with life changes (divorce, death of a loved one, retirement, etc.).
Children learn (at least in part) because	Adults are more concerned about the immediate

learning will be of use in the future.	applicability of learning.
Children are often externally motivated (by the promise of good grades, praise from teachers and parents, etc.)	Adults are more often internally motivated (by the potential for feelings of worth, self-esteem, achievement, etc.)
Children have less well-formed sets of expectations in terms of formal learning experiences. Their "filter" of past experience is smaller than that of adults.	Adults have well-formed expectations, which, unfortunately, are sometimes negative because they are based upon unpleasant past formal learning experiences.

The above list comes from "Plan instruction for adults, Module N-4," The National Center for Research in Vocational Education. (1987) Ohio State University, Columbus, OH