



International Childbirth Education Association

Working With Families Who Have Low Literacy Skills – ICEA Teaching Idea Sheet #13

It has been said that 23 million Americans may not be able to comprehend what health professionals are discussing with them. They may not understand written instructions or audiovisual aids. Functional literacy crosses racial, ethnic and economic lines. It is not an easy task to identify people who might have trouble and a person who has difficulty reading is unlikely to tell you. Childbirth educators who teach families that are young, poor or speak English as a second language may see a high number of families who have minimal literacy skills.

To make sure that what we teach is being presented in a way that is easy to comprehend we must examine the teaching methods used and adapt them to meet the needs of these populations. The following suggestions may help when teaching families with low literacy skills.

WRITTEN MATERIAL

- Be careful about what material you select. Look at the whole piece and consider the readability, clarity, and amount of text presented.
- Look at any photographs and illustrations. Will they be acceptable to the group's

cultural norms? Will the pregnant woman and her family be able to identify with the people in the illustrations?

- Check the grade level of reading in a written brochure or handout by using an easy readability formula.
- Use written information as a reinforcement to what you teach, not as the primary source. Always use the piece of written information as you cover a topic, pointing out the areas of importance.
- Consider a variety of sources for appropriate material. *ICEA Bookmarks* has a great selection of posters and books, which would be appropriate for teens, adults and Spanish speaking students.
- The March of Dimes has many prenatal pamphlets which are well written for low literacy families.
- Your local county Home Extension office may also have literature on nutrition during pregnancy. Of course, you may want to write up your own handouts to meet the needs of your specific group.

VERBAL MATERIAL

- Use simple, non-condescending language in short, precise sentences. Don't ramble!
- Present only a few ideas at a time, allowing time for questions.
- Don't assume anything. Start with the very basic and build on your teaching.
- Connect new ideas with familiar experiences (e.g., contractions may feel like the baby balling up inside.)
- When introducing new terminology, always present the commonly known term as well as the proper term (e.g., "birth canal" and "vagina" Write the new term on a poster or whiteboard and refer back to it often. In this way, you teach the reading and recognition of these new words.
- Be careful of using words that can be taken literally or of leaving any part of an explanation to assumption. Explain very clearly what you mean.
- Use headings on a poster or whiteboard to help organize visually what you are presenting.
- Summarize, repeat, and ask for feedback to validate understanding.



POSTERS AND VISUAL AIDS

- Posters should be simple, uncluttered, not too technical, and present one or two ideas at a time.
- Be careful of using cartoon illustrations as they can actually create confusion if they are taken too literally. Simple drawings are best.
- Whole bodies should be depicted on posters to put the areas of interest into context with the rest of the body.
- Posters illustrating the changing anatomy of pregnancy are effective in black & white with the organs colored rather than with lots of color that tends to blend together. The specific organs of importance will then stand out more clearly.
- Hands-on visual aids are usually effective when they are explained well. Demonstration with return demonstration is effective and increases understanding/retention.
- Slide shows, video clips, and films need to be selected that depict people and situations with which the families will easily identify. Companies have focused on making videos that are great for outreach teaching. Be sure to preview any film or slides in their entirety before purchase.
- Always preface videos with an introduction about what will be seen and what you want students to look for. Don't be afraid to stop a video if you feel discussion would be helpful. Always follow videos with a thoughtful discussion.

- Slide shows are better understood with comments from the instructor than with a taped narration. It allows for discussion, review, and clarification.

By utilizing some of these simple guidelines, teaching families with low literacy skills can become the most effective and rewarding teaching you do.