

3

“I find it hard to teach when some learners are disruptive ...”

For Adult Literacy Practitioners

One of six info sheets about the effects of violence on learning

- ✓ Learn more about how violence affects learning.
- ✓ Identify approaches to program delivery that promote more effective teaching and learning.

Dealing with the impact of violence on learning is not as difficult as you might think. It may transform some of your most frustrating challenges, and lead to more success for everyone.

Your journal might say ...

“I’m struggling to know how to respond to the ‘lads’. The whole group of young guys seems to be always ready for a fight and to blame somebody else for starting it.

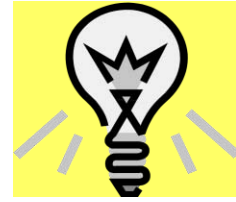


But Stan particularly worries me - he is so loud and angry. When he’s around I notice some of the women sit as far away from him as they can, especially Val who always seems so anxious and sits there waiting to be told what to do.

When the whole gang is there most of the woman are pretty quiet. I have threatened to chuck the guys out but I’m not sure they care that much. I’m scared some real violence is going to erupt and the more I try to set consequences and stop them from behaving like this the worse it seems to be getting.”



But did you know ...



① After people experience violence certain feelings may continue to shape their lives:

- Struggling to control themselves, others, and the environment;
- Connecting with their own self and others;
- Finding meaning and belief in a future.

Loud, angry learners may struggle with the need to feel in control and to connect. They may feel there is not a lot of point to studying - they don't believe they have a future.

① Learners may:

- Seem to believe they can never have control - act like a victim.
- Insist on total control.
- Switch between total control and total helplessness in an instant.
- Ask permission for everything, and take no initiative (like Val).
- Look for someone else to blame as a way to regain a sense of control (like the lads).
- Explode angrily when it seems others are trying to control them (like Stan).
- Be terrified by loud, angry people or tensions, and space out in response.
- Be disconnected, isolated, and alone - disconnected even from themselves.
- Act out, and bully and hurt themselves or others.
- Be part of a gang or clique - seek to belong and connect.
- Not ask for help when they need it.
- Not seem to believe in a future or to care about 'consequences'.

① In the aftermath of a repeated sense of threat, a person can register even a pleasant surprise or something exciting or new as danger. This can lead the analytical thinking part of the brain to close down.



- The 'lads' may be anxious and hide it as they respond aggressively to everything - even a look or a request - as if it is life-threatening. This reaction may also explain why many learners can't settle and seem always ready to 'fight'.
- ① Traumatized children often believe they won't live to be adults. Why not take risks, take drugs, or commit crimes? Why try to stick at studies for the future? Talk about 'consequences' isn't likely to have much effect on the 'lads' behaviour - except they'll think you're trying to control them, and react to that.

What Can I Do to Help Everybody Learn?

- 1. Develop curiosity about behaviours while avoiding judgement.**
 - Try to be curious about where any frustrating or counter-productive behaviour may have come from. Talk about it as ordinary in the aftermath of trauma.
- 2. Encourage learners to take control of their learning.**
 - Create regular structures to give options and allow learners to control their own learning - without anxiety-producing openness. For example, team teaching that offers an 'inhale' room - where you teach something, and an 'exhale' room - where learners choose what to do. (Thanks to Kate Nonesuch from BC for this idea.)
 - Provide creative (not confrontational) ways to work towards change. For example, another idea from Kate Nonesuch: Make a rule that learners should refuse to be bored. When they say they are bored, work with them to make it better. What would change the boredom to interest? Is it too easy, too hard, too disturbing, or what?
 - Stand side by side with a learner and point out the problem you both need to find a solution for. Avoid confronting learners face-to-face and criticizing who they are.
 - Talk quietly and alone with a learner about a problem and how to address it - not in front of their peers or other teachers. Avoid any possibility of humiliating or shaming learners.



3. Create connections and community, and as safe a learning environment as possible.

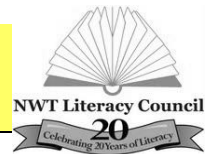
- Frequently carry out activities to help learners get to know each other well.
- Recognize the whole person. Help learners feel physically comfortable and emotionally safe. Nurture their spirit and self-esteem, and help them feel smart and capable.
- Work with learners to set boundaries and to make sure the classroom is a safe and comfortable place for everyone. Ask any learner whose behaviour might scare others to leave – until they change their behaviour.
- Prepare to deal with violence if it erupts. Know who you can call for help.

4. Help learners believe in their future.

- Help learners to see small, gradual change in their success at their studies. This helps them learn to see ‘middle ground’ and get out of ‘all or nothing’ reactions.
- Create holistic curriculum that encourages learners to express themselves in many different forms: music, visual arts, movement, as well as words.



More Information



Go to www.learningandviolence.net

- [Impact of violence on learning](#) – esp. Acting Out, Lost Hopes and Dreams.
- [Violence in your learning space](#)
- [Helping others learn](#)

NWT Literacy Council

- Box 761, Yellowknife, NT X1A 2N6
- Phone toll free: 1-866-599-6758
- Email: nwtliteracy@nwtliteracy.ca
- Website: www.nwt.literacy.ca

Funding for these info sheets came from literacy coalitions in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Alberta, NWT, and BC. Jenny Horsman did the research and wrote them. Mary McCreadie, NWT Literacy Council did this layout and editing. Oct. 2009

