



Reaching Individuals along all Literacy Levels

A Technical Assistance Bulletin for Rape Crisis Counselors, Advocates, and Prevention Educators

Understanding the Connections between Literacy and Sexual Violence

Sexual violence can interfere with an individual's education, including literacy. The short- and long-term effects of sexual violence - including post-traumatic stress disorder, difficulty concentrating, nightmares, flashbacks, fear, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, self-blame, and shame - can obstruct an individual's capacity to learn, socialize, and succeed.

Sexual violence can create a downward spiral for many victims/survivors, the beginning often being interrupted education and dropping out of school. Without a high school diploma, a college degree, and literacy skills, many victims/survivors are unable to compete for well-paying jobs. Victims/survivors often find themselves trapped in low-paying, service sector jobs, and unable to meet their most basic needs in life.

Barriers in Accessing Services

The social stigma of rape weighs on many victims'/survivors' shoulders, making it difficult for them to come forward, disclose, press charges, and get the help they need. Imagine in addition to being a victim/survivor of rape, you also lack basic literacy skills. The double stigma of rape and illiteracy can compound a person's shame, self-blame, and isolation, making it difficult for them to reach out.

Furthermore, rape crisis services and materials are often inaccessible to people with low literacy skills. Although well-intentioned, our brochures and outreach materials are often text-intensive and filled with statistics; our prevention education programs target grade levels that exceed the general public's; our services often involve written pre- and post-tests, client questionnaires and forms, handouts, and written activities.

It is important that rape crisis advocates, counselors, and prevention educators understand the connection between literacy and sexual violence and how they can appropriately respond.

Understanding Literacy

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II of the Workforce Investment Act) defines literacy as "an individual's ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society" (Adult Bureau and Literacy Education Interagency Coordinating Council [ABLE ICC], 2002).

Between 40 and 44 million adults in the United States lack the skills necessary to fill out a job application, locate the time and place on a meeting form or read a simple story to a child.

In December 2005, the National Center for Education Statistics released the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL 2003) - a national assessment of English language literacy among American adults age 16 and older. The study revealed that a large percentage of adults in our state, counties and communities lack the literacy skills necessary to compete in a global economy, to fully participate as citizens and community members and to support their children's learning (PA Dept. of Education, 2005).

Simply stated, 90 million adults nationwide cannot achieve life goals because they lack basic literacy skills (ABLE ICC, 2002). In fact, between 40 and 44 million adults in the United States lack the skills necessary to fill out a job application, locate the time and place on a meeting form or read a simple story to a child (National Center for Family Literacy, 2006).

To help us better understand the literacy proficiency of American adults, NAAL 2003 organizes literacy levels into four categories:

- ◆ Below Basic - indicates the most simple and concrete literacy skills, i.e., searching a short, simple text to find out what a patient is allowed to drink before a medical test; signing a form; and adding the amounts on a bank deposit slip.
- ◆ Basic - indicates skills necessary to perform simple and everyday literacy activities, i.e., finding in a pamphlet for prospective jurors an explanation of how people were selected for the jury pool; using a TV guide to find out what programs are on at a specific time; and comparing ticket prices for two events.
- ◆ Intermediate - indicates skills necessary to perform moderately challenging literacy activities, i.e., consulting reference materials to determine which foods contain a particular vitamin; identifying a specific location on a map; and calculating the total cost of ordering specific office supplies from a catalog.
- ◆ Proficient - indicates skills necessary to perform more complex and challenging literacy levels, i.e., comparing viewpoints in two editorials, interpreting a table about blood pressure, age and physical activity; and computing and comparing the cost per ounce of food items.

Adult literacy has profound implications on society, within families, in the workplace, in combating poverty and in relation to other social issues.

NAAL 2003 found that approximately 16 percent of American adults function at below basic literacy levels; 28 percent at basic; 43 percent at intermediate and 13 percent of American adults are considered proficient. Adult literacy has profound implications on society, within families, in the workplace, in combating poverty and in relation to other social issues.

Literacy transfers directly from parents to children; a child's success in school is strongly linked to the mother's educational level (ABLE ICC, 2002). Many adults with limited literacy skills struggle economically, are unemployed or working in jobs with low pay; many receive public assistance (Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education [ABLE], 2005). They may lack the skills to access and understand health-related information and as a result, often are unable to engage in preventive health practices (ABLE ICC, 2002).

In Pennsylvania, more than four million adults lack the basic and literacy skills for gainful employment and self-sufficiency (ABLE, 2005). Of equal concern is the fact that less than five percent of adults in need of basic skills actually participate in adult education programs (ABLE ICC, 2002). In 2003-2004, Pennsylvania's family literacy programs served 3,548 families, consisting of 3,718 adults and 4,986 children (ABLE, 2005).

How Rape Crisis Centers can Respond to the Needs of Victims/Survivors along all Literacy Levels

When creating direct service or outreach materials it is best to incorporate universal strategies into existing efforts rather than create an entirely different approach to reaching people with basic or below basic literacy levels. Isolating individuals with low literacy skills and tailoring outreach and services may be nobly intended but can result in victim-blaming and demeaning responses.

Direct Services

It is important that direct service providers meet all clients where they are, refraining from making assumptions or judgments and dispelling myths and misconceptions. The same is true when working with people of varied literacy levels. Like rape, poverty, and trauma, literacy is invisible. It is impossible to tell whether a person is struggling with literacy by looking at him or her.



Furthermore, a counselor/advocate may work with a client for many months before realizing he or she functions at basic or below basic literacy. There are steps direct service providers can integrate into the empowerment model to ensure their individual and group counseling services reach individuals along all literacy levels.

Signs that a client may struggle with literacy:

1. forgets his or her glasses and therefore cannot see the materials/paper;
2. forgets to or did not have time to complete the counseling activity, such as journaling, letter-writing, ecomaps, etc.;
3. asks you to review materials aloud;
4. forgets to fill out the forms/questionnaire/pre- or post-tests; and
5. prefers not to read aloud during group/individual sessions.

Universal approaches counselors/advocates can incorporate into existing services:

- ♦ *Provide all clients with choices.* Ask your clients if they prefer to read materials, watch them on video, hear them on tape or have you review them orally.
- ♦ *Offer assistance.* Ask your clients if they would like assistance in completing written materials such as intake forms, questionnaires, counseling activities/handouts, pre- and post-tests, etc.
- ♦ *Show respect.* When you ask if someone needs assistance with a form, handout, questionnaire, etc., try framing your question as follows: "These forms can be really confusing for a lot of people. I have a hard time with them myself. Would it help if I summarized the content and we walked through it together?" This conveys respect for the client and validates what he or she might be feeling.
- ♦ *Don't assume.* Avoid making assumptions in general, including those about literacy. Don't judge a book by its cover. People with low literacy skills are not a homogenous group. They may be highly successful or struggling in their professions, young or old, with a disability or without, male or female, rich or poor, and from any racial or ethnic group.
- ♦ *Use graphics, photos, and pictures.* Include pictures that tell a story in the handouts, activities, and materials you give to clients. When designing materials for adults, please use age-appropriate images; pictures should not be too childish or juvenile. Although children's brochures often have pictures, they are not appropriate for an adult audience. Pictures should be concrete (instead of abstract), realistic, and with appropriate backgrounds and details that help convey the concept/message.
- ♦ *Use graphics/pictures on agency signage.* Include graphics/pictures on all agency signage, such as EXIT, bathroom, stairwell, elevator, counseling/group room, and other signs.
- ♦ *Write at a 5th grade level.* If developing text-based counseling materials, write them at a 5th grade reading level. However, it is most helpful to still offer alternatives and/or assistance with reviewing such materials orally.

- ♦ *Offer alternatives to written counseling activities.* Instead of requiring individual clients or group members to complete written counseling assignments/activities such as journals, letters, or ecomaps, offer the option of doing collages with drawings or pictures cut out of magazines.
- ♦ *Use audio and visual materials.* Integrate visual and audio materials in your outreach and counseling services. For example, provide an overview of services, clients' rights, and information about confidentiality, etc. on a video or audio tape.
- ♦ *Be culturally sensitive.* Remember that just because materials have been translated in Spanish or another language does not mean that your Spanish-speaking clients can read the text. Provide videos and audio materials in Spanish and other languages whenever possible.

Outreach Materials

When creating materials for public consumption, it is recommended that materials be written at a fifth grade reading level. In fact, most newspapers across the country follow this general rule when developing content for news stories.

With research indicating almost one half of America's adult population functions at basic or below basic reading levels, it is important to develop materials that are easily understood across all skill levels.

Flesch-Kincaid Readability Test

One quick and easy method for determining the readability level of a document is to apply the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Test. Designed to indicate how difficult a reading passage is to understand, the Readability Test is comprised of Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level.

Flesch Reading Ease scores reading material on a scale of 0-100. Scores of 90-100 are considered easily understandable by an average 5th grade reader; scores of 60-70 are easily understood by 8th and 9th grade students; and passages with results of 0-30 are best understood by college graduates. For example, the Harvard Law Review has a general readability score in the low 30s (Wikipedia, 2006).

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level rates reading materials based on U.S. grade levels; for example, a score of 6.1 would indicate that the text is understandable by an average 6th grade student (Wikipedia, 2006).

When creating content for a new brochure, curriculum, etc. it is easy to determine the Flesch-Kincaid Readability in Microsoft Word. To activate the readability statistics complete the following steps:

1. Go to Tools section of Word
2. Select Options
3. Select Spelling & Grammar Tab
4. Select "Show readability statistics"
5. Run Spelling & Grammar from the Tools menu. At the conclusion of the spelling and grammar check, a message box will appear that lists the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level at the bottom (Wikipedia, 2006).

Tips for Content Development

The Pennsylvania Department of Education's Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education recommends the following tips when creating materials for general distribution:

- ♦ Refrain from using ALL CAPS - this is too difficult to read
- ♦ Focus on three important concepts or ideas
- ♦ Keep text simple

- ◆ If possible, create a pictorial message
- ◆ Create a "hook" on the front cover - use a graphic or make a statement that connects the audience to a real-life experience
- ◆ Include a phone number (preferably 800 number) where a person may call for additional information
- ◆ Limit the use of statistics

Finally, to assure a project is easily understood and addresses the needs of the intended audience, take time to field test the new material(s). Before money is spent on printing, share final drafts with members of the target audience and ask them to review the document for clarity and overall appeal. Taking time to implement these steps will help ensure the final product fulfills its intended purpose.

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Resources

- ◆ **Pennsylvania Literacy Corps:** <http://www.pde.state.pa.us/able/cwp/view.asp?A=12&Q=39721>
- ◆ **Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy:** <http://www.ed.psu.edu/isal/links.htm>
- ◆ **Pennsylvania Family Literacy:** <http://www.pafamilyliteracy.org/pafamilyliteracy/site/default.asp>
- ◆ **National Center on Adult Literacy:** <http://www.literacy.org/>
- ◆ **Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape:** www.pcar.org

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