

Getting Started:

A Guide to Adult Literacy in BC



Getting Started: A Guide to Adult Literacy in BC

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This guidebook is a publication of Decoda Literacy Solutions. It provides an update to *Learning Without Borders: An Introduction to Community-Based Adult Literacy in British Columbia (2008)* and *Its Own Reward: A Guide to Community-based Adult Literacy Volunteer Tutor Programs (2009)*, published by Literacy BC.

This guide is also available online: <https://www.decoda.ca/resource/rsc-adults/adult-literacy-guidebooks/getting-started-a-guide-to-adult-literacy-in-bc/>

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Getting Started	6
Tutor Training Basic Elements.....	9
Training Topics	11
Support and Recognition.....	12
Roles, Responsibilities and Risk Management	13
Resources	14
Program Planning and Evaluation Guide	17
References.....	24

“...it is hard to identify any other single issue that can have such a large payoff to individuals, the economy and society” – Craig Alexander



Introduction

Adult literacy refers to the ability to understand and use printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.

This guidebook contains helpful information about adult literacy programs, including volunteer tutor programs. It contains:

- Information on tutor training
- Tips for volunteer management
- An evaluation tool appropriate for all adult literacy programs

The guidebook is by no means complete – it simply gives a general overview, with references to some useful resources.

Why is adult literacy important?

Throughout our lives, it’s vital that we learn new skills, improve our knowledge, and increase our literacy – especially in today’s increasingly complex world. Technology is moving at an unprecedented speed. Everyone must learn, all the time, simply to keep up with the pace of change – especially adults and seniors. Although the majority of British Columbians have adequate literacy skills, too many simply do not.

The latest large-scale literacy survey, Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), found that more than 700,000 British Columbians have significant challenges with literacy. A staggering 45 percent of British Columbians aged 16 to 65 may have difficulty understanding newspapers, following instruction manuals, reading health information and accomplishing other daily living tasks. Fifty-two percent may have difficulty calculating interest on a car loan, using information on a graph, calculating medicine dosage and managing other daily living tasks.

In Canada, some groups are more likely to experience literacy challenges. These include:

- Canadians with fewer years of schooling
- Immigrants
- Indigenous people
- Older Canadians

We know that Canadians with stronger literacy skills enjoy better health and are more likely to be employed and engage in their communities. They are better prepared to manage their personal finances, understand their rights and responsibilities, and support their children’s learning.



What are adult literacy programs?

Adult literacy programs help people improve their reading, writing, math, oral communication, digital technology and learning skills. Adult literacy practitioners develop learning plans based on the goals and learning needs of each individual; instruction is often integrated into the life requirements of that person. For example, if a learner needs a driver's license, literacy improvement is specifically integrated into learning how to pass the driver's exam.

Adult literacy programs often provide small group sessions and one-to-one tutoring. Many use trained volunteer tutors so people can get individualized help. Programs are offered by community literacy organizations, colleges and school districts. Literacy instruction may also be embedded in other services, such as community kitchens or employment skills programs, with literacy skill development taking place in tandem with other skill development.

The characteristics of adult learners and the barriers learners may face should inform the planning for any adult literacy program.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

In distinguishing learning in adults from learning in children, the following characteristics of adult learners have been proposed:

- Adults are autonomous and self-directed.
- Adults have a foundation of life experiences and knowledge.
- Adults want to learn something that is relevant to them.
- Adults are goal oriented.
- Adults are practical.

These characteristics exist on a continuum and there can be wide variations between individuals. What does this mean for practice? Adults learn best when:

- They are involved in the planning and evaluation of their learning.
- Their prior knowledge and experience are respected and connected to new learning.
- Learning is explicitly designed to meet their goals.
- A connection is made between what they are learning and their lives.
- They are treated with respect.
- Opportunities for interaction and collaboration are available.

Barriers to Participation

Implicit in adult literacy work is the need to consider the barriers to participation adult literacy learners may face. Learners may be busy with work and family; be facing financial, health, childcare or transportation constraints; or have had negative past experiences. At times, programs create barriers to learning with delays, waitlists, inconvenient schedules or an unfriendly environment.



Getting Started

Most communities in British Columbia have a Literacy Outreach Coordinator (LOC). The role of the LOC is to work with the Literacy Task Group to identify local literacy needs, to facilitate collaboration among agencies and to help implement the Task Group's literacy plan.

The overall goals of the Literacy Outreach Coordinator are to facilitate, stabilize and sustain the literacy work that results from community planning. The specific objectives of the LOC are to:

- Strengthen and support community literacy work as a result of broad-based planning.
- Develop and strengthen partnerships and communication between organizations and agencies that have a stake in literacy.
- Mobilize community resources and support fund development.
- Create awareness and understanding about literacy.
- Support training and best practice for an integrated literacy delivery system.
- Be part of a province-wide community of literacy practice.

If your community has identified adult literacy as a need, the Literacy Task Group may agree that you need to start an adult literacy program. Or, you may want to review an existing program to make sure it is meeting your community's needs.

What needs to be in place?

The following list outlines the components of a successful adult literacy program:

Host agency – This agency is an established society, often a literacy organization with registered charitable status for the purpose of requesting, receiving and managing program funds and ensuring that services provided are responsible and accountable.

Program funds – The provincial government supports adult literacy programs in the province through Community Adult Literacy Program (CALP) grants. Communities may find other sources of funding, depending on the needs of their program.

Program coordinator – This is often a part-time position. This person is considered pivotal to the success of the program. This position may be a volunteer tutor coordinator if the literacy program relies solely on volunteers for instruction.

Program administrator – This is a paid position, or a function of the host agency, board of directors, or some other arrangement. The administrator ensures the program has adequate support and that the usual administrative services are provided (payroll, insurance, etc.) with attention given to all funders' requirements.

Program volunteers – Many programs use trained volunteer adult literacy tutors. Volunteer tutors are required to be over the age of 18. They undergo training for their role and are required to have a criminal record check. There may be other volunteer roles as well, such as helping with events and fundraising. Volunteer time commitments vary with each organization.

Program Coordinator

Hiring committee – The committee is comprised of a small group, perhaps three or four people, with some background and experience in literacy or a related field. Ideally, one member of the committee is a program participant. For each program coordinator candidate being interviewed, provide members of the committee with the pre-established criteria against which to grade the application.

Job description – A sample list of qualifications for the position could include:

- Relevant post-secondary education or equivalent experience
- Demonstrated knowledge of literacy issues and learning challenges
- Proven ability to facilitate groups, organize and manage projects
- Excellent oral and written communication skills
- Community development experience
- Ability to work with groups and individuals with diverse backgrounds
- Cultural sensitivity, knowledge and training

Volunteer Tutor Coordinator

The Volunteer Tutor Coordinator helps build the confidence and abilities of new tutors so they can be effective in their work with learners. It is a very satisfying experience for everyone involved in the program – coordinators, tutors and learners – when learning and confidence grow in uniquely different ways. It is also what makes the job interesting and rewarding.

Below is a sample description of the responsibilities and challenges involved in the work of the Volunteer Tutor Coordinator. These tasks vary from place to place, depending on the type of program and the support available.

Recruit and select volunteer tutors. Volunteers come with a variety of skills and interests. To guide the selection of potential tutors, it is helpful to have some criteria that relate specifically to literacy service delivery. The coordinator should interview each candidate to determine their suitability and areas of interest. The coordinator should also ensure that organizational policies on criminal record checks for volunteers are adhered to.

Facilitate tutor training. The coordinator should plan content, schedule sessions and make all the necessary arrangements for the delivery of training, keeping within the budget allocated for the purpose.

Conduct intake interview with potential learners. An initial interview should review the learner's background and help establish the learner's goals. An informal assessment of literacy skills should be conducted. There are many good resources available to guide this, e.g. Canadian Adult Reading Assessment (CARA).

Match learners with compatible tutors. The coordinator arranges the initial meeting and assists the tutor and learner in clarifying long- and short-term goals. As needed, the coordinator provides specific lesson planning ideas around the goals and guidance in the use of suitable resources.

Regularly monitor progress of learner-tutor pairs. Most volunteer tutors appreciate the benefits of a program that is monitored at regular intervals. This can be done by phone, in-person, virtually or by email. For tutors and learners, it is an opportunity to talk about their current learning activities; for the coordinator it is a chance to observe and invite questions. From time to time, it may be necessary to re-assess a tutor-learner match. For example, a learner may wish to start working on math skills, but the tutor may not be comfortable with tutoring math. A new tutor may need to work with the learner on that goal.

Maintain records of tutor-learner activity and progress. The coordinator keeps program statistics in order to meet funders' requirements, reports to the board of directors on the program's success and maintains an accurate picture of the work being done. Tutors may be asked to submit a short monthly report tracking their hours to support this aspect of the coordinator's responsibility. Learners should be re-assessed midway through and at the end of the program year so their progress can be recorded.

Prepare and submit reports in a timely manner. It is necessary to compile data and prepare reports to effectively evaluate the program and to represent the program to the host agency and funders. Reports usually reflect program activities, participation (number of learners, tutors, and volunteer hours committed), learner progress, community involvement, partnerships and other relationships.

Evaluate the program. Program evaluation methods and guides can be obtained through the Decoda Literacy Library. Some are listed in the Resource section of this guide (pp. 14-16). The evaluation tool at the end of this guidebook is a good place to start.

Volunteer Literacy Tutors

A volunteer literacy program depends on a dedicated group of trained volunteers.

Aside from applying the knowledge and skills acquired in tutor training, the tutor should work toward developing a trusting relationship with the learner, demonstrating a variety of personal skills. Volunteer tutors should be organized, strong communicators, good listeners and encouraging.

The following list of qualities that make an effective tutor is not comprehensive; there are as many positive tutor qualities as there are good tutors.

What makes an effective tutor?

- Acceptance of people as they are, their current and past circumstances, and their dreams
- Adaptability to different ways of doing things, to changing needs and circumstances
- Belief in a person's ability to learn and that change and progress are possible
- Caring and respect for the learner and their unique situation and needs
- Cultural sensitivity and awareness of cultural diversity and the implications for tutoring
- Patience and perseverance without becoming frustrated when gains seem small
- Self-awareness of one's own non-verbal behaviours and biases
- Sense of humour to ease the tensions that may arise from the challenges of learning

Tutor Training Basic Elements

For tutor training to have the most impact, it must be efficiently planned, well-resourced and have effective follow-up. There are several methods of delivering tutor training; organizations must determine which best suits their model of program delivery.

In some scenarios, one on one training of tutors occurs in a Just in Time model, while other training is better suited to a full classroom approach that spans many hours. Training material in lengthier training models can seem abstract, but the shorter orientation and focused in-service sessions of Just in Time can become more time consuming for coordinators working with limited hours.

Regardless of the choice of delivery, the same basic elements need to be considered.

Planning and Scheduling

- Determine the length of each session and the period of time for training (e.g. Tuesday and Thursday for three hours for two weeks). Choose a time and day that suits most people and inform them of the training schedule well in advance.
- Training may be delivered in-house or through an outside facilitator. Budgetary considerations may influence the length of the training if someone is brought in from outside the organization.
- Book the location where training will take place. Plan to have refreshments available if the budget permits. If not, you may consider asking everyone to bring something to share.
- Ensure that there are enough binders and copies of print handouts (three-hole punched), pens, paper, etc. for each tutor. Trainees may be offered a binder with a complete set of the printed training material at the first session, or they may receive it one session at a time. Or, provide a complete set of materials electronically.
- Display some of the resources you will refer to in the training. Don't forget to also inform tutors of the Decoda Literacy Library and show them how to sign up to borrow materials to use with their learners.
- Include time for a social and refreshment break during each session.

Evaluation

Build evaluation into the training, either at the end of each session or at the completion of the training. Evaluation forms, or other evaluation methods can be used for this.



Training Topics

Although the content of any tutor training varies from place to place, there are basic elements that are consistent with all programs and are considered essential to the formation of strong tutoring skills.

This guide does not provide a detailed explanation of training topics and resource tools. The Decoda Literacy Library has resources to support tutor training in the province. (Please refer to the Resources section (pp. 14-16) for more information.)

Introduction to Literacy

- Principles of Adult Learning
- Stages of Learning
- Barriers to Learning
- Approaches to Teaching

Teaching Reading	Teaching Writing	Teaching Numeracy
Language experience Sight words Echo reading Comprehension: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-reading • Cloze Decoding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonics • Word attack strategies • Context clues 	Language experience Listing and mapping Writing process Audience Basic paragraph Capitalization and punctuation	Math anxiety Everyday math
Teaching IT	Identifying Barriers	Planning Lessons
Basic technology use Internet security	Learning disabilities Physical challenges	Learning goals Learning outcomes Expectations Learning plans Resources

Support and Recognition

Tutor Support: In-service training is a form of support that helps tutors expand their knowledge and skills. Regularly scheduled sessions allow tutors to reconnect with one another as well as improve their tutoring ability.

Session topics could include:

- An introduction to new methods of tutoring
- A review of resources, or information about program development
- Opportunities to network and share experiences with other tutors
- Guest speakers on relevant topics of interest
- A refresher on topics included in tutor training
- Training on additional literacies – financial, health, media, etc.

Whenever possible provide information on local professional and personal development opportunities.

Volunteer Recognition: Plan to celebrate your tutors' wonderful work with an annual volunteer appreciation event or with some form of individual acknowledgement of their contribution – a card or a gift from the organization.

Coordinator Support: Decoda Literacy Solutions networks with all literacy programs across the province and is a source of support to the program coordinator. Decoda has current information about practitioner training events, best practices, new projects, etc., and is knowledgeable about provincial issues, partnership development, funding opportunities and more.

Professional Development: Professional development opportunities for practitioners can be found on the Decoda website (www.decoda.ca). These include free training webinars, workshops and a bi-annual conference.

Learner Support: There are many ways to support learners in adult literacy programs:

- Apply for funds to assist learners with expenses such as transportation, childcare, or a meal at the program - costs that could make a difference between a learner attending or not attending.
- Make a bulletin board available for learners to use. Learners can put up notices, humour, artwork, poetry or helpful tips for others.
- Involve learners in fundraising events, public information sessions, newsletters, etc. Learners often have skills and expertise to help in a variety of activities and they can expand their skill sets with these opportunities.
- Create a program Facebook group so tutors and learners can stay connected and share with one another.

- Host a learner event so learners can share what they know. We all learn more when we teach what we know.
- Host an evening potluck or afternoon tea to celebrate learners' accomplishments and provide them the opportunity to connect with one another.
- Support learners with transition to other programs, such as Adult Basic Education (ABE), English as an additional language (EAL) or workplace training.

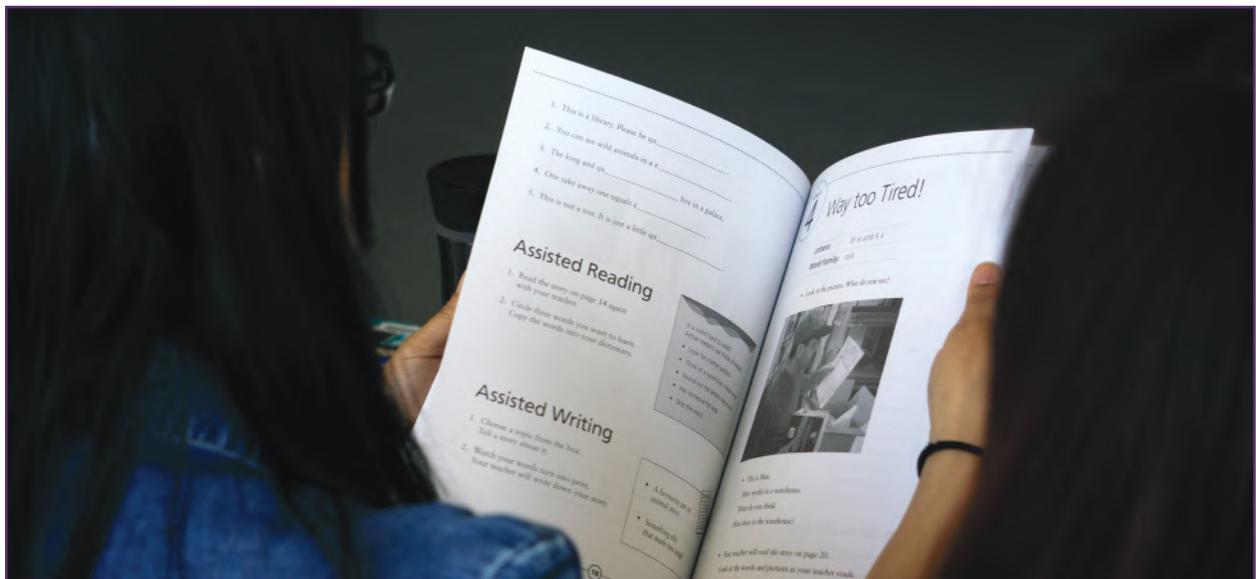
Roles, Responsibilities and Risk Management

It is important that volunteer tutors understand the roles and responsibilities of program coordinators, tutors, and adult learners – and how these roles relate to one other.

Clarification of roles and responsibilities is an important element for both volunteer management and risk management. Volunteers work better when they understand the expectations and boundaries for their role.

Risk management is an important aspect of literacy programs. The safety and security of volunteers and learners should be taken very seriously. Volunteers should be aware of policies and procedures concerning emergency situations (fire, medical, etc.), personal safety, and unusual occurrences that bear special attention.

Most literacy organizations require all staff and volunteers get a criminal record check. If volunteers are working with vulnerable populations, this is an important consideration. Organizations can use the online Criminal Records Review Program through the provincial government website.



Resources

Resources for Coordinators

Campbell, P. (2000). *Canadian Adult Reading Assessment (CARA): Instructor's Manual*. Edmonton, AB: Grass Roots Press.

Campbell, P. (2000). *Canadian Adult Reading Assessment (CARA): Student's Assessment Booklet*. Edmonton, AB: Grass Roots Press.

Campbell, P. (2003). *Teaching Reading to Adults: A Balanced Approach*. Edmonton, AB: Grass Roots Press. Two DVDs on comprehension strategies and word recognition strategies to accompany this book are also available.

Campbell, P. (2010). *Diagnostic Adult Learning Assessment for Beginning Readers (DALA)*. Edmonton, AB: Grass Roots Press.

Campbell, P. (2010). *Teaching Beginning Readers*. Edmonton, AB: Grass Roots Press.

Levy, C. (2010). *ESLSAP Coordinator Resource Binder*. Victoria, BC: Open School BC. Also available online at <https://mytrainingbc.ca/ESLSAP/>

Still, R., Weir, L. & Goldblatt, A. (2007). *Creating Learning Partners*. Calgary, AB: Literacy Alberta. Also available online at en.copian.ca/library/learning/crlepa/creating.pdf, en.copian.ca/library/learning/crlepa/handout/cover.htm, and en.copian.ca/library/learning/crlepa/overhead/overhead.pdf.

Resources for Tutors

Cameron, J., Rabinowitz, M. & Davies, P. (2000). *A Guide for Tutoring Adult Literacy Students*. Rev. ed. Victoria, BC: Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology.

Campbell, P. (2011). *Working with Beginning Readers*. Retrieved from www.grassrootsbooks.net/pdf/working-with-beginning-readers-v2.pdf

Centre for Family Literacy. (2006). *Literacy Tutor's Guide: Reading for Meaning and the Writing Experience*. 3rd ed. Edmonton, AB: Centre for Family Literacy.

Colvin, R. (2009). *Tutor: A Collaborative, Learner-centred Approach to Literacy Instruction for Teens and Adults*. 8th ed. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press.

Frontier College. (2011). *A Frontier College Tutor's Guide: Working with Adults*. Retrieved from <https://www.frontiercollege.ca/getattachment/0d4d3f8d-b36e-40f4-b1a4-0dfff465f8f0/Frontier-College-Adult-Tutor-Guide-Adults.aspx>



Caption

Levy, C. (2010). *ESLSAP Tutor Handbook*. Victoria, BC: Open School BC. Also available online at <https://mytrainingbc.ca/ESLSAP/>

Lipke, T. (Ed.). (2013). *Teaching Adults: A Literacy Resource Book*. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press.

Norton, M. (1988). *Journeyworkers: Approaches to literacy education with adults. Tutor's Handbook*. Calgary, AB: The Alberta Educational Communications Corporation.

Steel, N. & Beswick, V. (2004). *Tutor Tools*. Calgary, AB: Literacy Alberta. Also available online at calp.ca/_uploads/resource-doc-394.pdf.

Resources for Learners

Practitioners in BC can borrow resources, free of charge, from the Decoda Literacy Library. Resources on tutoring strategies or materials to use with learners, including readers, workbooks and guides are available. Learn more at www.decoda.ca/resources/library/.

These are some resources often borrowed for use with adult learners:

[The Active Reader series](#)

[Amazing Animals series](#)

[Breakthrough to Math series](#)

[Donna Bowler's ESL Literacy resources](#)

[Grass Roots Press Biographies](#)

[Grass Roots Press Photostories](#)

[Meaning Matters series](#)

[Spelling Toolbox series](#)

[Vocabulary Boosters series](#)

[Workwrite series](#)

[Writing Out Loud](#)

The Westcoast Reader is a monthly newspaper designed to help people develop reading skills. The paper is published 10 times a year and is available in print and online. Articles are written at three reading levels. Each issue has accompanying Teachers' Notes with exercises, resources and discussions. There are also bonus articles with exercises and audio available online.

To subscribe or to access online content, visit www.thewestcoastreader.com.

Program Planning and Evaluation Guide

The following is an adaptation of the *Adult Literacy Volunteer Tutor Program Evaluation Kit* (1989) by Audrey Thomas. It can be used as a guide to plan a new adult literacy program or a tool to evaluate an existing literacy program.

Philosophy	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
There is a written philosophy/mission statement.			
The philosophy/mission statement has been shared with program staff and the Board of Directors			
The philosophy/mission statement is reviewed regularly.			
Notes:			

Planning	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
Community needs are assessed.			
The target population for the program is defined.			
There are clearly defined program goals and objectives, that include literacy outcomes.			
Planning sessions are conducted regularly.			
Everyone involved with the program participates in setting program goals.			
Everyone involved in the program is aware of the goals for the current year.			
Progress towards goals is reviewed.			
Notes:			

Funding	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
Resources for staffing, facilities, supplies and materials are adequate.			
Resources are available to cover support services for learners, e.g. childcare, transportation.			
Funding is assured on a regular basis.			
Alternate funding sources are explored			
Reports to funders are complete and on time.			
Notes:			

Community Outreach	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
Links to other educational programs in the community are developed and maintained.			
Links to social service agencies are developed and maintained.			
The program reviews its community and organizational relationships regularly.			
Referrals to other programs and services are made as required.			
Notes:			

Awareness and Promotion	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
The program determines and uses successful participant recruitment strategies.			
Recruitment strategies are implemented according to program needs.			
Contacts with media and referral sources are developed and maintained.			
Program information is publicized regularly with posters, brochures, newsletters and social media.			
Clear language and design principles are used in print and online communications.			
Notes:			

Access	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
The program has advertised contact information and hours of service.			
The program is accessible.			
The program is free.			
The program is offered at a suitable time.			
The program length is suitable.			
Notes:			

Learner Support	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
The program provides childcare.			
The program provides meals or snacks.			
The program provides bus tickets.			
The program provides information about counselling, financial services, educational or employment opportunities, supplies and/or resources.			
Networking opportunities are provided.			
Former participants mentor current participants.			
Information on follow up activities is provided at the program end.			
Notes:			

Participation	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
All potential participants are interviewed and receive an orientation.			
Participants are involved in setting their own learning goals.			
Participants take part in program planning and review.			
Staff and volunteers enhance learning by building relationships with participants.			
Progress and achievement checks are built into the program.			
Notes:			

Facilities and Equipment	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
Program space is adequate for program activities.			
Office space is adequate.			
Display and storage space are adequate.			
The physical space is safe and free from health hazards.			
Heating, ventilation and lighting are adequate.			
Washroom facilities are adequate.			
Program equipment is adequate.			
A first aid kit is on site.			
A fire extinguisher is visible and available.			
Notes:			

Instructional Strategies and Materials	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
Instructional strategies are built around the interests and needs of participants.			
Instructional strategies are based on an understanding of adult learning.			
Instructional materials are appropriate for adults.			
Instructional strategies are inclusive and culturally appropriate.			
Learning materials and activities reflect the home, culture and community of program participants.			
Staff enhances learning by building strong relationships with adults and children.			
Notes:			

Administration	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
The paid staffing level is adequate.			
Job descriptions are available.			
Staff and volunteer qualifications are clearly defined and appropriate.			
Staff and volunteers participate in professional development and training.			
A program budget is developed.			
The program complies with all relevant privacy legislation.			
Adequate financial records are maintained.			
Attendance, assessment and progress records are kept.			
Confidentiality of records is assured.			
Notes:			

Volunteer Management	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet
Volunteers have terms of reference.			
Volunteers have current criminal record checks on file.			
Volunteers have orientation and training.			
There is support and supervision for staff and volunteers.			
Volunteers are recognized and thanked for their service annually.			
Notes:			

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