



# The Why and How Of Adult Learning\*

AARP commissioned Harris Interactive Inc. to conduct a survey of 1,019 people age 50 and older to explore how and why people over 50 learn about new things. The final weighted sample included 508 interviewed by telephone and 511 (weighted down from 2,556) surveyed online. (See Appendix B for detailed methodology.) This research explores typical learning methods, learning motivations, learning interests, and the life-event contexts in which learning takes place. Key Findings in these important areas are detailed below.

## How Adults Typically Learn

**Newspapers, magazines, books, and journals are the tools used for learning most of the time by adults age 50 and older regardless of age, gender, income, or education.**

- On the whole, over six in ten adults in this age group (64%) always or most of the time use newspapers, magazines, books, and journals when they want to learn.
- Women (66%); men (62%); and people of different ages (57% - 70%), economic (63% - 66%), and educational (61% - 73%) backgrounds use these tools always or most of the time in greater proportions than all other learning methods.

**Not surprisingly, more respondents interviewed online typically use online techniques than those interviewed by telephone.**

- Over half of adults 50 and older (56%) interviewed online search the Internet always or most of the time to learn about something they want or need to know compared to 14% of respondents interviewed by telephone.

## Best Ways to Learn

**Reflective and hands-on approaches are among the best ways for older adults to learn. (see Exhibit below)**

- Nine of ten adults 50 and older (90%) agree that they learn best by watching or listening and then thinking.
- The same proportion (90%) agree that they learn best by putting their hands on something and manipulating it or figuring it out.

## Why Older Adults Want to Learn

**Older adults are interested in learning so that they can keep in touch with themselves, their community, and the world.**

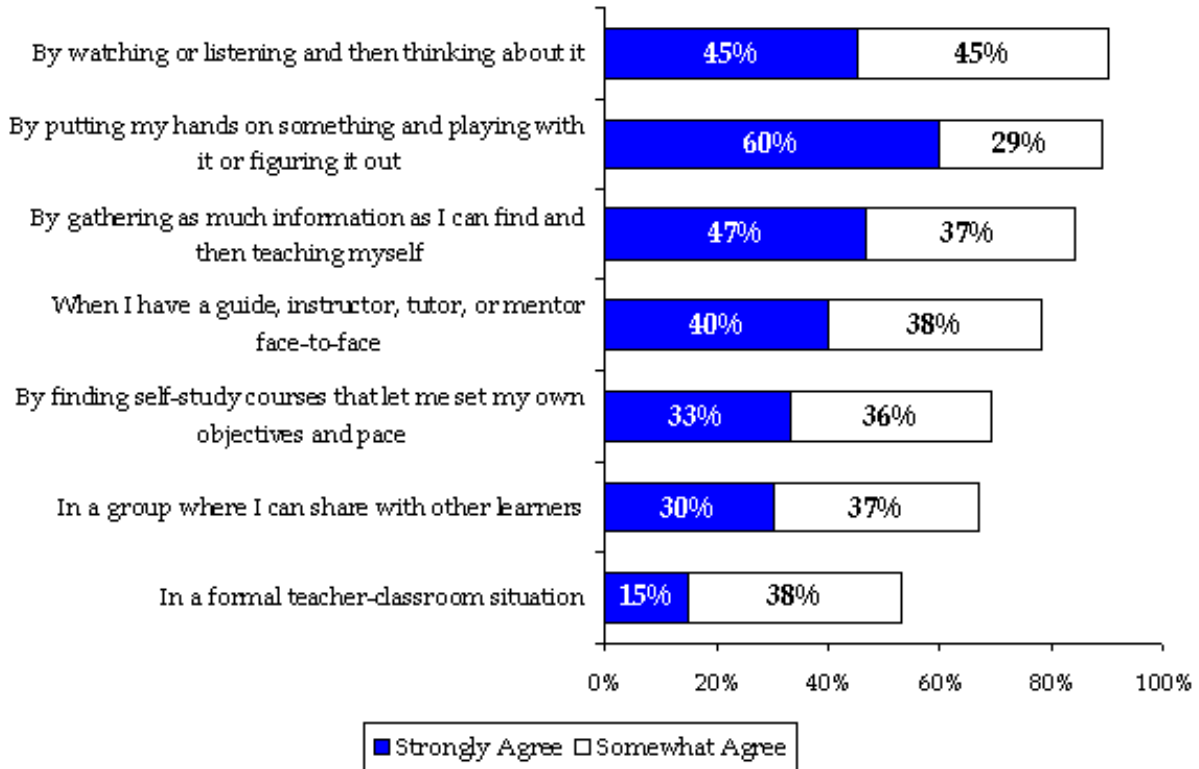
- Over nine of ten adults age 50 and older agree that they want to learn:
  - To keep up with what's going on in the world (93%)
  - For their own spiritual or personal growth (92%)
  - For the simple joy of learning something new (91%)
- This level of agreement is seen across most demographic subgroups including education, income, gender, and age.

## Interest in Various Subjects

**Adults 50 and older are most interested in learning about subjects that would improve the quality of their lives, build upon a current skill, or enable them to take better care of their health. Six topics generate the greatest interest:**

- Learning more about a favorite hobby or pastime (62% extremely or very interested)
- Learning more about advanced skills (52% extremely or very interested)
- Getting more enjoyment or pleasure out of life (51% extremely or very interested)
- Having a healthy diet and nutrition (49% extremely or very interested)
- Measuring personal health status (48% extremely or very interested)
- Managing stress (46% extremely or very interested)

**Exhibit 1. Best Ways to Learn** (% Strongly or Somewhat Agree)



## Preferred Learning Formats

Older adults' preferred learning formats vary according to the topic under study. However, for 11 of the 17 topics about which they were asked, respondents express preferences for three of eight formats: learning in loosely-structured groups, in workshop settings, or by teaching themselves.

## Degree of Investment

Adults 50 and older are eager to use what they learn, want to have at least some control over the learning process, and are typically willing to spend modest sums of money to learn.

- Roughly half of adults 50 and older want to use what they learn immediately (55%). They are also willing to spend some time learning if they have control over when and how much time is spent (47%).
- Three in ten are willing to wait until some time in the future to use their new skills (28%) and are willing to

spend all the time it takes to learn about something they really want to know (30%).

- On average, respondents are willing to spend a maximum of \$101.

## Incidence and Impact of Events

Older adult learners experience different life events at different ages. Respondents between 50 and 59 are somewhat more likely than older ones to have experienced these family-related events or new accomplishments:

- Become a caregiver for a child or grandchild (19% of those age 50 - 59 versus 14% of those age 60 - 74)
- Had a child go to college (18% of those age 50 - 59 versus 10% of those age 60 - 74 and 5% of those 75 or older)
- Had their last child move out of their home (15% of those age 50 - 59 versus 10% of those 60 - 74 and 7% of those age 75 or older)
- Had an adult child move back into their home (15% of those age 50 - 59 versus 9% of those age 60 - 74 and 6% of those age 75 or older)

**Over half of adult learners surveyed (53%) say they experienced at least one event with a major impact in their life in the past 12 months. Of those experiencing a major event, health-related and caregiving events had the greatest reported impact on their everyday lives:**

- Having a major personal illness (61%)
- Having a major illness in the family (56%)
- Having a death in the family (56%)
- Becoming a caregiver to a parent or other elderly family member (50%)

## Conclusions

Lifelong learning experiences that would likely hold the most appeal for mature adults include subjects that are personally meaningful, taught in environments that provide a direct learning experience, allow adults control over all aspects of the learning process, and are not too expensive. Adults age 50 and older learn for the simple joy of learning, to enhance their spiritual or personal growth, and to keep up with what is going on in the world. These reasons are rather universal—large proportions of men, women, those from different economic and educational backgrounds, and from different age groups express agreement with these reasons for learning.

Mature adults prefer learning methods that are easy to access, that require small investments of time and money to get started, and that allow learning to begin immediately. Print media such as books, magazines, newspapers, and journals are the learning tools used most frequently by adults regardless of differences in age, income, education, or gender. Not surprisingly, adults interviewed via the Internet are more likely than those interviewed by telephone to search the Internet or use computer-based learning programs as a learning method.

The least common methods used to aid learning include techniques that require greater investments of time, money, and effort as they serve to delay the learning process. Over half of adults 50 and older report they never learn by buying

or borrowing computer-based teaching programs, or audio or video tapes, finding a tutor or professional, enrolling in a college or community college class, or by getting involved in a community group or volunteer organization.

The best way most older adults report they learn is through a direct, hands-on experience. The two most common, best-learning methods engage three of the five senses—seeing, hearing, and touching. Nearly all middle-age and older adults say they learn best by putting their hands on something, playing with it, listening to it, watching it, and finally thinking about it.

Adults 50 and older are interested in learning most about things that enrich their lives, that help them stay healthy, and that bring them more enjoyment. Roughly half of adults are interested in learning about favorite hobbies or pastimes, new advanced skills, how to get more enjoyment out of life, and having a healthy diet and nutrition.

Mature adult learners (despite some differences in age, gender, income, and education) prefer some type of group learning environment when it comes to such topics as understanding others better, getting involved in their community, or finding out about educational travel opportunities. However, these adults prefer some type of individual setting to learn about topics that are of direct personal benefit. These topics include all the health-related subjects and learning more about a favorite hobby or pastime.

A number of important factors should be considered when creating learning programs for adults age 50 and over. These include the degree to which adult learners have control over the learning process, how soon they can put into practice their new skills and ideas, and not surprisingly, how much the programs cost. Adults are typically willing to spend up to \$101 to learn about something they always wanted to know about. Most adults 50+ want to use what they have learned right away or in the near future; very few are willing to wait longer. While about half are willing to devote at least some time to developing their new skills (if they can control when and how much), one-third are willing to take all the time it takes to master their new ability.

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\* An Executive Summary of an AARP Survey on Lifelong Learning conducted for AARP by Harris Interactive Inc.

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