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Bridge4Mothers

2025-1-DE02-KA210-VET-000359232

Training of Trainers (ToT) Digital Literacy & Gender-Informed Digital Upskilling

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G. Guidance Resource

Trauma-Sensitive & Supportive Facilitation Strategies

Bridge4Mothers – Creating Safe & Supportive Learning Environments

Purpose of This Resource

This resource supports trainers, educators and facilitators in creating learning environments where participants are treated with dignity, offered meaningful choices and encouraged to develop their skills.

Trauma-informed approaches emphasise physical and emotional safety, trust, collaboration, peer support and learner voice. In education, these principles provide a basis for considering how teaching methods, communication and participation arrangements might affect learners. SAMHSA

Trauma-sensitive facilitation is not trauma treatment. The trainer's role is to support learning, reduce unnecessary barriers and connect participants with appropriate help when needed—not to diagnose conditions, investigate personal histories or provide therapy. GOV.UK

The strategies, example phrases and activities below are suggested applications for adult learning and vocational education and training. They can be adapted to face-to-face, online and blended sessions.

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1. Trainers Can Support Learners By:

Encouraging Participation Gently

Invite participation without making personal disclosure or immediate public speaking a condition of belonging to the group. Meaningful choice and a voice in decision-making are central to trauma-informed practice. GOV.UK

Begin with a clear explanation of the activity, its purpose and the available participation options. For example, learners might think privately, write a response, discuss with a partner or contribute to the wider group.

Allow someone to pass on a particular question without requiring a public explanation. Where a learning outcome must still be demonstrated, agree on another suitable way to complete it.

Suggested trainer language:

“You can contribute aloud, write your response or listen first. We can also discuss another way for you to complete the activity.”

Practical example: Before a group discussion, give everyone two minutes to consider the question individually. Invite contributions rather than calling unexpectedly on a particular learner.

Avoiding Judgement

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Use respectful language when discussing difficulties, mistakes, attendance or incomplete tasks. Focus on what happened and what support is needed rather than assigning labels such as “lazy”, “unmotivated” or “difficult”.

Do not interpret silence, hesitation or a request for a break as proof of either disengagement or trauma. Ask about the learning situation without seeking a personal explanation. This reflects the trauma-informed emphasis on understanding needs rather than judging presenting behaviour. GOV.UK

Suggested trainer language:

“I noticed that this activity was difficult to complete. Would clearer instructions, more time or a different format help?”

Practical example: If someone misses a task, arrange a brief private check-in. Discuss what is manageable and agree on a realistic next step instead of addressing the issue in front of the group.

Recognising Learner Strengths

Look for abilities and experiences learners already bring to the session. A strengths-based approach recognises people’s capabilities and involves them in identifying solutions rather than doing everything for them. Pennsylvania.gov

Invite learners to identify skills developed through work, caregiving, volunteering, community involvement or everyday problem-solving. Do not assume that a particular life experience has produced a particular skill; let the learner decide what feels relevant.

Link feedback to something observable, such as organising a task, asking a useful question, checking information or helping the group consider another perspective.

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Suggested trainer language:

“You divided the task into clear steps. How could you use that planning skill in the next activity?”

Practical example: Ask participants to identify one everyday task they manage and the skills it involves. Offer a fictional example for anyone who prefers not to discuss personal circumstances.

Supporting Collaboration

Build opportunities for learners to work alongside one another, exchange ideas and contribute to shared decisions. Collaboration and peer support are recognised elements of trauma-informed approaches. SAMHSA

Give group work a clear purpose and explain how contributions will be organised. Offer roles such as reader, note-taker, organiser or presenter, and allow learners to discuss which role they would like to try.

Keep collaboration focused on the learning task. Participants should not be expected to share difficult experiences, provide counselling or become responsible for another learner’s wellbeing.

Suggested trainer language:

“Let us decide how to divide the task so that everyone has a meaningful role. You can ask to change roles as we work.”

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Practical example: In a digital skills activity, one learner explains a process while another practises it. Then offer the opportunity to exchange roles, with trainer support available.

Listening Actively

Give the learner time to explain what they choose to share. Listen without pressing for a fuller account, and focus on their immediate needs and concerns. WHO guidance on supportive responses to distress emphasises listening without pressuring people to talk. World Health Organization

Avoid interrupting with advice or assuming that you already understand. Briefly summarise what you heard and check whether you have understood correctly.

Keep questions relevant to support and participation. “What would help with today’s task?” is usually more appropriate in a learning session than asking about the origins of someone’s distress.

Suggested trainer language:

“It sounds as though the pace is difficult today. Have I understood correctly? Would you prefer a pause or to work through one part together?”

Practical example: When a learner raises a concern, agree on one next action and check whether it addresses what they asked for.

Creating Flexible Participation Opportunities

Provide more than one way to engage with an activity where the learning outcome allows it. Ask about preferences rather than deciding what someone needs on their

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behalf. Supporting choice and taking individual needs seriously are core trauma-informed principles. Pennsylvania.gov

Possible adaptations include written rather than spoken responses, individual preparation before group work, accessible instructions, shorter task stages or an agreed extension.

For online sessions, explain available options such as chat, audio or camera-off participation where appropriate. Where a particular format is essential—for example, demonstrating a practical skill—explain why and plan suitable support.

Suggested trainer language:

“The learning goal stays the same, but we can discuss a different way for you to demonstrate it.”

Practical example: Offer a choice between a short written reflection and a brief private conversation with the trainer when both assess the same understanding.

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2. Positive Facilitation Includes:

Empathy

Approach the learner’s perspective with curiosity and respect rather than assuming that your experience is the same as theirs. Acknowledge what they tell you without minimising it or claiming to know exactly how they feel.

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Empathy should also include respect for the learner's decisions. Ask whether they would like practical assistance before offering a solution.

Suggested trainer language:

"Thank you for letting me know. What would make taking part more manageable today?"

Avoid responses such as "Others have it worse" or "You just need to be positive".

Patience

Allow thinking time, repeat instructions when requested and break unfamiliar tasks into manageable stages. Do not turn speed into the main measure of success unless it is genuinely part of the learning objective.

Offer assistance without immediately taking over. After demonstrating a step, give the learner an opportunity to try it using their usual tools and supports.

Suggested trainer language:

"Let us focus on this step first. We can review the next one when you are ready."

Supportive Feedback

Make feedback specific, respectful and useful. Identify what the learner has done, explain what needs further attention and agree on a manageable improvement.

Comment on the work or behaviour rather than making a judgement about the person. Offer sensitive feedback privately and avoid comparisons with other participants.

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Suggested trainer language:

“Your main point is clear. Adding one example would help explain it further. Which example would you like to use?”

Confidence-Building Approaches

Create opportunities to practise, make revisions and recognise progress. Invite learners to compare their current work with their own earlier attempts rather than with someone else’s performance.

Set goals together and make the next step achievable. Recognise asking for clarification, using an agreed support or identifying an error as valuable parts of learning.

Suggested trainer language:

“You found and corrected that step yourself. What helped you notice it?”

Avoid exaggerated reassurance or promises of success. Keep encouragement connected to the learner’s actual effort, strategies and achievements.

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3. Preparing a Predictable and Respectful Session

Trustworthy practice involves explaining what will happen, making expectations clear and following through on commitments. GOV.UK

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Before the session: Share the purpose, main activities and planned breaks. Review examples for unnecessary sensitive content, prepare an alternative activity and check that instructions and materials are accessible.

At the beginning: Agree how the group will communicate, ask questions and handle disagreement. Explain that personal stories are optional and that fictional examples are welcome. Identify how learners can request a pause or speak privately with the trainer.

During the session: Explain changes to the plan, check whether instructions are clear and intervene when someone is mocked, interrupted repeatedly or excluded.

At the end: Invite a brief, optional check-out about the learning experience. Ask what supported participation and what could be improved, without requesting details about personal histories.

A suggested group agreement is:

“We will listen respectfully, allow people to pass on personal questions, avoid sharing others’ stories and ask before offering advice.”

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4. Responding When a Learner Becomes Distressed

Prioritise immediate needs and practical support rather than asking the person to explain what happened. WHO guidance recommends a humane, non-intrusive response that respects dignity, culture and abilities. World Health Organization

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Pause and approach calmly. Avoid drawing unnecessary attention to the learner. Ask whether they would like support.

Offer a small number of choices. These might include taking a break, moving to a quieter place where appropriate, continuing with another task or contacting a support person. Do not insist on talking, physical contact or a particular relaxation exercise.

Listen to what the learner wants to share. Do not investigate, diagnose or ask them to recount a distressing experience. Acknowledge their concern without promising that everything will be fine.

Connect with appropriate support. Use the organisation's agreed safeguarding and referral procedures. For an immediate safety emergency, seek emergency assistance rather than trying to manage the situation as an ordinary teaching issue.

Suggested trainer language:

"We can pause. You do not need to explain personal details. Would a break or help contacting someone be useful?"

Before delivering sessions, clarify with your organisation how privacy, safeguarding concerns and referrals will be handled. Explain the relevant limits of confidentiality rather than promising absolute secrecy. Information-sharing decisions should follow the applicable procedures and requirements, not an improvised classroom agreement. Scottish Government

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5. Suggested Practice Activity: From Pressure to Support

Purpose: Help trainers practise offering choice while maintaining the learning objective.

Scenario: A learner says, “I do not want to present in front of everyone.” The activity aims to assess their ability to explain a simple idea clearly.

Ask trainers to draft a response that acknowledges the concern without requesting personal details. They should then identify an alternative that still assesses the intended skill, such as presenting to the trainer, preparing an audio response or practising with a partner first.

Example response:

“Thank you for telling me. The aim is to practise explaining your idea clearly. You could begin with a partner or discuss another suitable format with me.”

Afterwards, discuss whether the response preserved dignity, offered a genuine choice and maintained the learning goal.

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6. Trainer Reflection

After a session, consider:

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Choice: Did learners have realistic options for participation, or only the appearance of choice?

Communication: Did I listen and check understanding before offering solutions?

Strengths: Did my feedback identify actual skills and progress?

Boundaries: Did I remain within my role and use appropriate support arrangements?

Improvement: What one change will I make before the next session?

My next action:

Support or resources I need:

Key Message

Support learning without requiring personal disclosure. Offer choices without withdrawing guidance. Recognise strengths without overlooking support needs.

A trauma-sensitive facilitator does not need to know every learner's history. The practical commitment is to teach with respect, respond without judgement, maintain appropriate boundaries and work with learners—not make decisions for them.

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