MAIN STREET PRESENTS

Financial Literacy Activities for Every Stage of Life

Explore **practical financial literacy ideas, educational topics, and outreach strategies** you can use to support smarter financial habits at every stage of life. From high school students to working adults, this guide helps community financial institutions lead meaningful conversations.

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Why Financial Literacy Matters and How You Can Help

Personal wealth is a cornerstone of the American dream. That's why financial education plays such an vital role in helping individuals and families make confident decisions throughout life. While the U.S. remains one of the wealthiest nations in the world, **financial literacy levels still lag behind many other developed countries.**[1]

In 2025, financial literacy among adults was particularly low, with those surveyed answering just 49% of basic personal finance questions correctly on average. That's based on a 28-question index covering topics like borrowing, saving, and investing.[2]

This may sound like bad news, but there's a silver lining. If we're the wealthiest nation in the world now with only a cursory understanding of personal finances, imagine how much more prosperous we'd be if we approached money with confidence.

To that end, we're sharing **literacy activities** that financial institutions can use to get involved. Here's how you can contribute to our financial IQ while engaging with account holders in your community.

Table of Contents

Good Financial Habits Start Early

Young minds are sponges, capable of rapidly absorbing new concepts. From an early age, children are taught reading, writing, history, math, science, and other subjects that they need to understand the world and themselves.

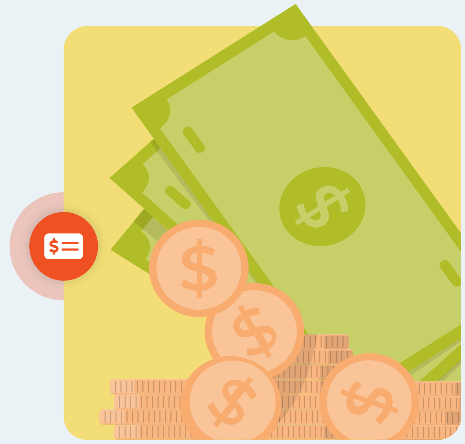
But the ability to grasp new ideas depends on exposure to them. It falls on us to introduce our children to the subjects they need most when navigating American life.

Financial literacy is one such subject – critical to modern life but missing from too many classrooms. That's a problem – not just for teens and their parents, but for our nation. **Teens without money management skills grow up to be adults who don't know how to budget, spend, or save.**

Financial Literacy Activities for Teens

Money habits begin forming at this stage, when many young Americans are getting their **first jobs, their first paychecks, and their first debit accounts.** Choose one of the following activities to get started, or choose several to try out over the coming months.

Understanding a First Paycheck



The common reaction to a first paycheck is "cha-ching!" But that joy, like the dollars and cents it represents, is quickly spent.

What looks like a full paycheck on paper rarely matches what actually lands in an account. Taxes, withholdings, and deductions add a layer of complexity that many young earners aren't prepared for.

This creates a natural opportunity for financial institutions to step in with clarity. **A simple explanation of how paychecks work** – what's taken out, what remains, and how that income can be used – can shape expectations early and reduce confusion later.

RELEVANT SKILLS

- Understanding gross pay vs. net pay
- Common payroll deductions (taxes, benefits)
- Reading a basic pay stub
- Connecting hours worked to take-home income
- Setting expectations for consistent vs. variable

Ways to Introduce This Topic

Paycheck Breakdown
Share a simple paycheck breakdown through a short email or letter.

Take-Home Guide
Provide a one-page guide in-branch for parents and students to take home.

Classroom Discussion
Partner with a local school for a brief classroom discussion about paychecks.

Downloadable Resource
Add a downloadable first paycheck resource to your website for easy access.

Account Communication
Include a short explanation in new account or debit card communications.

Targeted Direct Outreach
Send targeted emails and letters to households with youth accounts.

Budgeting Basics

For Americans of nearly every age, budgeting is the bogeyman of our financial lives. But a lack of understanding around this bedrock principle shouldn't haunt us forever. **Lifelong budgeting should start with an early and enthusiastic introduction.**

At this stage, budgeting doesn't need to be precise. It needs to be understood. A simple framework – how money comes in, where it goes, and what's left over – can go a long way toward building lasting habits.

Financial institutions can play a steady role here by introducing structure without overcomplicating the message. The goal is not perfection – it's awareness.

RELEVANT SKILLS

- Tracking income against spending over time
- Distinguishing between needs, wants, and savings
- Applying a simple budgeting framework
- Recognizing how small expenses accumulate
- Adjusting spending based on available income

Ways to Introduce This Topic

Budgeting Framework
Share a budgeting framework (e.g. 50-30-20 rule) through emails or letters.

Take-Home Guide
Provide a one-page guide in-branch for parents and students to take home.

Scenario Exercises
Partner with local schools for short, scenario-based exercises.

Online Budget Guide
Add a basic budgeting guide to your website for easy access.

Account-Based Tips
Include budgeting tips or resources in youth or teen account communications.

Targeted Budget Outreach
Use core data to send budgeting tips to households with youth accounts.

Debit and Credit Fundamentals

Money is still mostly abstract for high school students. They watch their parents tap a card or phone at a point-of-sale system, and voilà, they get what they came for.

Simple addition and subtraction can help students understand spending and saving, but it can't help them with the financial instruments that shape how money is accessed, borrowed, and repaid.

Financial institutions can provide clarity early by focusing on **how these tools behave in everyday situations.** A few simple examples can go further than a full explanation.

RELEVANT SKILLS

- Understanding the difference between debit and credit usage
- Recognizing how purchases affect account balances
- Evaluating when to use debit vs. credit
- Understanding how credit balances and repayments work
- Identifying overdraft scenarios and how they occur

Ways to Introduce This Topic

Debit vs. Credit Guide
Share a short, comparison of debit and credit through emails or letters.

In-Branch Handout
Provide a one-page handout in-branch for students and parents.

Real-World Scenarios
Walk through common scenarios during class visits or in-branch conversations.

Online Explainer
Add a basic explainer to your website or resource center.

Account Communication
Include credit education in onboarding or early account communications.

Targeted Credit Education
Use core data to send targeted emails or letters on debit and credit basics.

Financial Independence Changes Everything

After years of boring homework, early bedtimes, and a meager allowance, young adults are starving for independence. For many, that means college. For others, it's their first full-time job. On either path, it doesn't take long to learn that **making your own choices and making the right choices are two different things.**

Suddenly, young adults have to choose between wants vs. needs, could do vs. should do. Unsurprisingly, their success is spotty at best – and at a time when consequences are higher than ever.

A whopping 66% of Gen Z lives paycheck to paycheck – an unforgiving margin of error for those just learning what it means to live independently. Combine these challenges with an already low rate of literacy and you get a perfect storm that leaves our young adults too vulnerable.

Financial Literacy Activities for Young Adults

Ah, the freedom of college! The quad, the dorm, and the ever-present temptation to ignore sound financial practices. Financial mistakes at this age are far from harmless. But this is also a time when **young adults should be leaning into financial systems** and setting themselves up for the future.

Building Credit & Understanding Credit Scores

To college students, credit scores may as well be dark matter. While our existence depends on credit scores, nobody seems to know what they are or how they work.

At its core, a credit score can shape everything from loan approvals to interest rates. Without a clear understanding of how everyday actions influence that number, small missteps can follow us for years.

This is where financial institutions can provide early guidance. **A straightforward explanation of how credit is built and how it breaks down** can give young adults a sense of control at a critical moment.

RELEVANT SKILLS

- Understanding the factors that affect a credit score
- Recognizing how missed payments create long-term consequences
- Managing credit card balances responsibly
- Connecting hours worked to take-home income
- Setting expectations for consistent vs. variable

Ways to Introduce This Topic

Credit Score Breakdown
Share a simple paycheck breakdown through a short email or letter.

Credit Builder Guide
Provide a one-page guide on how to begin building credit responsibly.

Common Pitfalls Checklist
Highlight common mistakes such as missed payments, and high balances.

Online Credit Basics
Add a credit basics resource to your website for easy access.

Early Account Education
Include credit education in onboarding or early account communications.

Targeted Credit Outreach
Use core data to send educational emails or letters to account holders.

Navigating Financial Independence

Setting out into the world can be a thrilling time for young adults. We become responsible for ourselves and are free to make the decisions we see fit, for good and for ill. We can have ice cream for dinner, stay up as late as we want, and spend money we don't have on things we don't need.

But for many, this is also the **first time that financial decisions are no longer shared or supervised.** Paychecks may be irregular. Expenses arrive with consistency. Small gaps tend to widen without much warning.

Financial institutions can step in by helping young adults understand how money moves in and out of their accounts – and how to stay ahead of it before bad patterns take hold.

RELEVANT SKILLS

- Balancing income against recurring monthly expenses
- Planning for bills that arrive on a fixed schedule
- Recognizing how irregular income affects spending decisions
- Identifying early signs of overspending
- Building habits that support day-to-day financial stability

Ways to Introduce This Topic

Monthly Money Guide
Share tips for balancing income and expenses through emails or letters.

Expense Checklist
Provide a one-page guide on how to begin building credit responsibly.

Spending Pressure Points
Highlight common problems (impulse spending, irregular income).

Independence Resource Hub
Add a short guide to your website focused on early financial independence.

Onboarding Tips
Include practical money management tips in onboarding communications.

Targeted Independence Outreach
Use core data to send targeted guidance to account holders.

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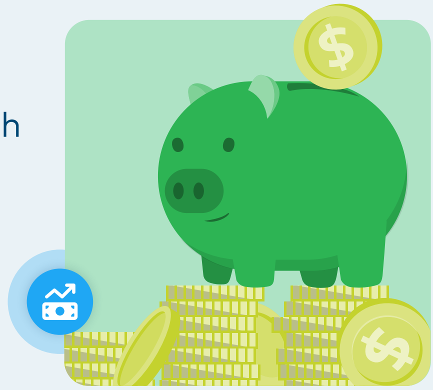
Investing Basics



These days, investing shares more with science fiction than with the steady, long-term approach we grew up with. While some college-aged Americans may be familiar with cryptocurrencies and NFTs (non-fungible tokens), they could use some help understanding more stable and time-tested opportunities.

For most college-aged individuals, investing starts small – if it starts at all. Income is limited. Expenses are immediate. What's left over may not feel worth investing. But this is exactly where early habits begin.

The goal is not to present complex strategies, but to c**onnect everyday account activity with simple, accessible ways to begin.**

RELEVANT SKILLS

- Recognizing how recurring contributions build over time
- Distinguishing long-term investing from short-term speculation
- Understanding the value of starting small
- Identifying basic entry-level savings and investment options
- Connecting time horizon to future growth potential

Ways to Introduce This Topic

Small Start Explainer
Share a simple paycheck breakdown through a short email or letter.

Beginner Options Guide
Introduce entry-level investment options such as savings accounts, CDs, and more.

Time and Growth Example
Highlight common mistakes such as missed payments, and high balances.

Getting Started Resource
Add a credit basics resource to your website for easy access.

Intro Investing Content
Share introductory investing content on your website or through emails.

Targeted Investing Outreach
Use core data to identify account holders who may be ready to invest.

Financial Decisions Grow More Complex Over Time

No two paths to adulthood are the same. What we learn, how we apply it, and how much it matters differs from person to person.

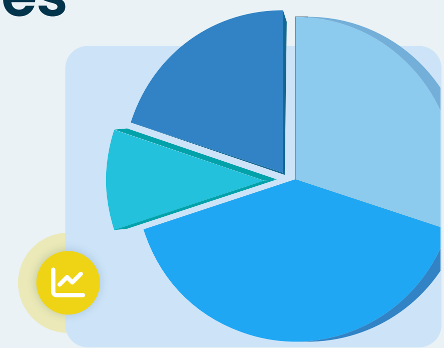
That said, we know what should be important to adults of different ages, and we can use that to guide no-judgment sessions in person or provide helpful resources throughout different stages of adulthood. Many of these topics can be uncomfortable to think about or discuss, making the role that community institutions play that much more important.

By starting these conversations, you may be able to **save your account holders from delayed retirements and spoiled legacies.**

Financial Literacy Activities for Adults

Managing money as an adult rarely becomes simpler with time. Financial priorities shift, responsibilities grow, and important decisions become harder to delay. These financial literacy topics and activities can help community institutions support more confident conversations around planning, investing, and long-term financial stability.

Managing and Growing Your Finances



At all stages of life, but especially in adulthood, investing depends on disposable income. Thankfully, any number of wise investment strategies exist for adults at all stages of life, whether they can spare $500 or $50,000.

As balances grow, so do the decisions attached to them. **Questions around allocation, risk tolerance, and time horizon** begin to matter in a more immediate way. Left unaddressed, these decisions are often delayed or made inconsistently.

Financial institutions can provide practical guidance for connecting current financial pictures to longer-term goals without overcomplicating the path forward.

RELEVANT SKILLS

- Understanding asset allocation and risk tolerance
- Recognizing how time horizon affects financial decisions
- Connecting savings levels to realistic growth strategies
- Evaluating financial goals against available resources
- Building confidence around long-term financial planning

Ways to Introduce This Topic

Allocation Overview
Share an overview of asset allocation & risk tolerance through email or letters.

Time Horizon Examples
Provide examples of how different time horizons can influence decisions.

Savings Strategy Guide
Offer a guide that connects savings levels to potential financial strategies.

Wealth Building Resource
Add foundational wealth-building content to your site and share it through email.

In-Person Seminar
Host a seminar to answer questions and provide clarity around long-term planning.

Targeted Credit Outreach
Send educational communications based on balances, product mix, or life stage.

Retirement Planning Basics

Next to nobody wants to work into their 70s or 80s, but life has a way of throwing unexpected expenses at us, and **retirement isn't always foremost on our minds.**

For many adults, retirement exists somewhere in the background – important, but easy to postpone. Time, however, is one of the few factors that cannot be recovered. Delays, even short ones, can have a lasting impact on outcomes.

Financial institutions can bring this into focus by making **retirement feel tangible rather than distant.** Breaking the process into manageable steps allows account holders to engage without feeling overwhelmed.

RELEVANT SKILLS

- Understanding the long-term impact of starting early
- Recognizing common retirement savings options
- Connecting contribution habits to future outcomes
- Evaluating how delays affect retirement readiness
- Breaking retirement planning into manageable next steps

Ways to Introduce This Topic

Early Start Projection
Share projections that show the impact of starting retirement savings early.

Savings Options Checklist
Provide a checklist of common retirement savings options and how they differ.

Contribution Habit Guide
Highlight how steady contribution habits can shape outcomes over time.

Retirement Planning Resource
Add retirement planning resources to your website and share them through email.

Life-Cycle Messaging
Include retirement-focused guidance in communications to relevant demographics.

Targeted Credit Outreach
Send educational communications based on balances, product mix, or life stage.

Estate Planning Fundamentals

As if financial matters weren't uncomfortable enough, they eventually collide with the least comfortable subject of them all – end of life planning.

Because of that discomfort, **planning is often delayed until circumstances force the issue.** Important details – beneficiaries, account access, and document organization – can be left unclear, creating unnecessary complications for those left behind.

Financial institutions can **approach this topic with sensitivity by focusing on preparation** rather than finality. When handled thoughtfully, these conversations provide reassurance rather than discomfort.

RELEVANT SKILLS

- Understanding the role of wills, beneficiaries, and powers of attorney
- Recognizing the importance of organizing financial documents
- Connecting account access and ownership details to family preparedness
- Identifying common gaps in estate preparation
- Approaching estate planning as a practical financial responsibility

Ways to Introduce This Topic

Estate Planning Checklist
Share a checklist of essential planning items (wills, beneficiaries, & powers of attorney).

Document Organization Guide
Provide guidance on organizing financial documents and account information.

Account Transition Overview
Offer general information on how accounts may be handled after death.

Estate Planning Resource
Add estate planning education resources to your site and share through email.

Guided Seminar
Host in-person seminars to walk account holders through the process step by step.

Targeted Estate Outreach
Use core data to send communication to adults who may benefit from guidance.

Who Fills the Financial Literacy Gap?

Financial literacy gaps rarely correct themselves. Without guidance, young people turn to influencers, early financial mistakes become long-term habits, and important adult decisions are delayed. **Community financial institutions** can fill that gap through clear, timely education that turns awareness into action at every stage of life.

Find More Tips, Tricks, & Advice on Our Industry Insights Page

Explore more educational resources, industry trends, marketing ideas, and practical guidance on our Industry Insights page. Find new ways to strengthen account holder relationships and support smarter financial conversations in your community.

SOURCES

1. Patrobas Sirabo Wafula, "Financial Literacy Around the World," SMMC News & Events Blog, University of Illinois System Student Money Management Center, April 15, 2022.

2. TIAA Institute and Global Financial Literacy Excellence Center (GFLEC). "National Financial Literacy Remains Stagnant at 49% as Generational Gaps Widen." May 29, 2025.

3. LendingClub Corporation. "At 73%, Millennials Are the Most Likely Generation to Live Paycheck to Paycheck." April 28, 2023.

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