



Any honest conversation about youth must address the challenges that young people and adult allies face when they work to engage children and youth throughout our communities. By their very existence, youth programs are made to respond to these challenges; ignoring them is not being honest about the purpose of youth programs. Racism, sexism, classism, homophobia... the list of challenges facing young people is enormous. However, one of the core challenges is a common experience that all people face early in their lives. That challenge is discrimination against children and youth.

Discrimination occurs anytime one thing is chosen before something else. That is often a good thing – otherwise, why wouldn't we all steal our food instead of growing it or buying it? We all discriminate everyday. However, discrimination often excludes people because of false bias or prejudice.

Discrimination against children and youth is caused by the bias adults have for other adults that causes them to discriminate against young people. Bias for adults is called adultism. When something is based on adultism, it is called adultcentrism. While adultism is sometimes appropriate, adultcentrism is often inappropriate. Compulsory education can force students to disengage from the love of learning. Youth development programs can force youth to disconnect from adults. Almost every activity that is for young people is decided upon, developed, assessed and redeveloped without young people. That is adultcentrism.

Language, programs, teaching styles, and all relationships between young people and adults are adultcentric. The most "youth-friendly" adults are often adultist, assuming that youth need them – which, while it may be true, is still centered on adult perspectives. Adultism is not always harmful – but adultism is always real.

Adultism leads to a phenomenon of "little adults" – young people who are "adults-in-the-making", rather than children and youth today. Adultcentrism leads to manipulating and tokenizing young people through Youth Voice activities. Despite the intention, that process often further disengages young people!

Adultism exists for a lot of reasons, including beliefs about the abilities of young people, roles of different people throughout society, and the nature of society. Those beliefs have sometimes lead to the fear of children, called pedophobia, and the fear of youth, called ephebiphobia. These fears drive much of society to segregate young people from adults, demonize youth in the media, and ostracize children from elders. These fears have filled our culture with double standards that constantly challenge young people.

Identifying Discrimination

Identifying different forms of discrimination against young people throughout our society is important. Following are some of those forms.

Discrimination against Youth in Language

- “Act your age.”
- “Children should be seen and not heard.”
- “What do you know, you’re just a kid!”
- “Do as I say, not as I do.”
- “You’ll understand it someday, just you wait.”

Discrimination against Youth in Youth Work

- Programs designed by adults for youth without youth
- Isolation of children and youth from adults
- Professional language does not allow youth to easily understand what is being done to them
- Evaluations engage adult staff and not youth participants

Discrimination against Youth in School

- Students are forced by law to attend schools that may not be effective
- Classroom learning relies on adults as sole-holders of knowledge
- Decisions about students, including learning topics, activities, punishments, budgeting and teaching methods are routinely made without students
- Adults routinely grade students without giving equal weight to students’ perspectives on their own academic achievement
- Double-standards in treatment, including when the belief that when teachers yell at students, they are controlling classrooms; when students yell at teachers, they are creating unsafe learning environments

Discrimination against Youth in Communities

- People under 18-years-old are virtual non-citizens without the right to vote or any tangible political representation and minimal influence
- Community problem-solving that routinely neglects youth members
- Business policies that allow for discrimination, such as “Under-14s must be accompanied by adults,” and “Under-18s cannot be managers.”
- Local laws that target youth, including anti-cruising and anti-graffiti laws
- Media bias against youth that alternatively portrays youth as apathetic super-predators who are obese, stuck on computers, gang members.

How YOU Can Resist Discrimination Against Youth

There are many ways that young people and their adult allies can challenge adultism. Addressing discrimination against youth is a challenge that many young people and adult allies should take personally, especially when armed with meaningful strategies for powerful action. Following are a few strategies for resisting adultism:

1. Adults should strive to be a role model for other adults. Demonstrate in your own conduct and the way you talk that you oppose attitudes and behavior that debase, degrade, inflict injury on or promote animosity against young people of all ages.
2. Youth should get to know your adults, no matter where they are – school, youth programs, the library, everywhere. Support those who actually show they care above all about young people, that they have integrity and that they can be objective.
3. Insist that your youth program/classroom/religious community/organization sets high goals and expectations for adults, no matter what positions they are in, where they come from or how much education they have.
4. Carefully examine the media in your community. See if it is realistic, democratic, and free of adultist biases. If they are not, demand coverage that is.
5. Insist that youth development, educational, and behavior management practices be reviewed for effectiveness. These practices reveal what adults do not know, not what they do.
6. Volunteer as an adult ally for a youth program or school.
7. Talk with young people you know. Listen to them. Engage yourself in their lives as appropriate, and as you are capable.
8. Provide literature and resources about Youth Voice to young people themselves.

Tips for Addressing Discrimination Against Youth

Advocating for youth throughout a community often means being prepared for just about anything – on a moment's notice. When facing adultism head-on, it can be important to be intentional in your efforts. Following are some tips when addressing adultism:

- Seek understanding by encouraging adults to examine adultism. Explore the feelings adults have about young people. Youth and adults should work together to find the source of frustration, resentment or treatment towards youth.
- Acknowledge anger and let youth and adults know that it is okay to feel anger – but remind them they do not need to act out their anger towards young people.

- Engage allies by asking an adult ally to address and explore adultism with other adults. If you are an adult trying to reach another adult, it can be powerful to bring young people directly into the picture.
- Remember that Youth Voice is for everyone, and that in easy times and struggling times, Youth Voice should be hard. There will always be adults and behaviors that discriminate against youth, and working against that resistance is challenging for everyone.
- You are not alone, and there are other people advocating for youth and struggling against adultism. Connect with others in your town, across Washington, and around the world – because they are out there!
- Stay focused, no matter how pointed the adultism might seem. Stay calm and try not to take it personally. Address behaviors, structures, and other things that can be changed.
- Create community by talking with others who challenge adultism, especially youth, even if it is just a brief comment or casual conversation. Adultism affects or has affected every single person in our society, and it takes persistence and teamwork to resist it.