

Adulthood: The Hidden Oppression of Young People

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Most people are at least familiar with the major “isms” of our social life: racism, sexism, classism. Many of us seek to understand the impact of these oppressions and at minimum try not to perpetuate them. But there is one group whose oppression we seem blind to: that of young people. Ask an ordinary person on the street what the term for youth oppression is, and he or she will most likely give you a blank stare, even though it is the one oppression that hits all of us early and hard and keeps on hitting until we cross that mighty stream into adulthood and begin to oppress the younger ones behind us. And by then, we have internalized the message: “I am not good enough.”

I first heard the term “adulthood” while attending a Re-evaluation Counseling class back in the early 90’s when I was the single mom of four teenagers. [Re-evaluation Counseling is also known as RC or Co-Counseling. See www.rc.org for more information.] Hearing the RC theory on the topic, I began to understand how the adults around me when I was young had instilled, not a sense of joy and excitement about the world and their confidence in my ability to solve any challenge, but rather feelings of fear and hopelessness. I realized I was unconsciously perpetuating my own fears, frustrations and stereotyped beliefs on each of my children. I decided the best thing I could do for them was to work hard to clear my own patterns and support them to find their own path. They didn’t get the stellar parenting I was hoping to give them by any means, but they did get my deep respect for who they were as individuals and what they wanted to do with their own lives. The five of us survived intact and the love and support keeps growing between us, now that they are young adults.

I can see now that I made a paradigm shift during those years. My children had become the catalyst for deep change in myself and I got in touch with the young person I was before I surrendered to the adult messages around me. I decided to publish a magazine called *Coming of Age* for parents and mentors of teens, and while it wasn't a commercial success, the experience working with teenagers to encourage them to write their life experience for an adult audience was exciting. After the magazine died its quiet death, I decided to go back to school to finish my undergraduate degree and earn a Master's in Family Life Education with an emphasis on Adolescent Development.

While working on my master's thesis, I couldn't understand why we have no commonly used term for the oppression of young people. After doing a great deal of research, I started to form an opinion. Part of the problem may be that the academic world controls much of what becomes mainstream, and academia refuses to confer a term for youth oppression. "Adultism," is almost never mentioned in the academic literature of childhood and adolescence.

It's not like no one has tried. One author, Jack Flasher, appears to have coined the term and defined it in his article "Adultism" in the journal *Adolescence* back in 1978. Flasher identified several commonly held adultist beliefs, for example that "all adults are superior in all skills and virtues to all children" and over 30 distinct adultist behaviors. For example, overlooking an adolescent's point of view, treating a child's beliefs, perspectives or feelings as trivial, controlling and invalidating a young person's intelligence are just a few of the ways that adultism may play out, both in the larger society and in the home. Adultism is also built into our institutions. For example, it can be seen in the way we structure our educational system around the teaching of academic

subjects without input from the primary recipients of its services, it is seen in our age-based laws such as obtaining a driver's license, voting in elections and drinking alcohol. While we are willing to send our young people to fight for democracy on foreign soil, we still withhold the right for them to cast a ballot for the politicians that might work harder to avoid such wars; and while an 18-year old can enlist in any branch of the military, they are prohibited from purchasing a beer. The list is long. I could go on and on...

A search of scholarly databases on the subject of adulthood is disappointing. For example, when the term is entered into three of the most commonly used databases for social science research (*PsycINFO*TM, *Education Abstracts*TM and *SocIndex*TM) only four articles are listed, one of which is Flasher's in *Adolescence*. Several researchers have made an attempt at coining other terms over the years. One suggested "juvenile ageism" and compared adults' ignorance of youth oppression in the 90's to whites' ignorance of racism in the 1850's. Several authors floated the term "childism" (in 1975, 1988 and 2000), but it apparently sank, never to be seen again. Compare these aborted attempts to name youth oppression to the word "ageism," the term that is supposed to apply to any age oppression. A subject search in the same three databases mentioned above using the word "ageism," yielded over 700 hits and virtually all the articles are about the oppression of older adults.

In my frustration to find an umbrella word for all the negative attitudes and behaviors adults project onto children, I decided to research some of the components of the oppression by searching on words such as: "age discrimination" "social status" "stereotypes" "age stigmas" and "patronizing speech" as they relate to young people. I found a small stack of articles, meager pickings for such a widespread and insidious

oppression. It could be argued that this significant omission in the scholarly literature on adolescence is itself a symptom of the oppression. Academics, who are all adults after all, simply do not want to admit that adults oppress young people. What oppressor ever wants to look at his or her oppressive behavior?

In contrast, popular culture has embraced the term and the concepts of adulthood more widely. A recent Google™ search on the word “adulthood” yielded over 24,000 hits; an increase of 800% in the two years since I wrote my thesis. Most of these are references to articles on websites of organizations whose mission includes the empowerment of young people, such as Youth Build U.S.A., the Free Child Project and the National Youth Rights Association. Within *Google Scholar*™, the term yields 131 search results. *Wikipedia*™ now has an extensive article about adulthood that provides the etymology of the word along with an in-depth discussion of the concept. As adulthood becomes more recognized outside the walls of the ivory tower, its notice by family scholars seems essential, though no more forthcoming. I recently submitted an article to a newsletter of the National Council on Family Relations for their issue on adolescence, and it was rejected.

It is a delight to interact with adolescents who have been consistently allowed and encouraged to think for themselves, to express their authentic natures, to learn at their own pace, and to explore the world with encouragement from supportive adults who have been careful to avoid passing along their own fears and prejudices. Empowered adolescents tend to have big ideas and don't accept that their dreams are naïve. They tend to be comfortable talking with adults because they assume they'll be respected for what they have to say. They have their own brilliant and innovative notions about how to live a

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fulfilling life because they have had minimal “molding” by their parents and other adults.

They act as “bullshit” detectors for the adults around them, keeping us all more honest.

And they don’t spend hours and hours in therapy as adults, trying to rediscover their essential nature as so many of us baby boomers have. We need empowered teenagers!

Raising the consciousness of adults on this issue is my life’s mission.

Margaret Pevec, MA, co-author of *What Kids REALLY Want to Ask: Using Movies to Start Meaningful Conversations (A Guidebook for Parents and Children Ages 10-14)* is collecting stories from young people about their personal experience of adultism. To submit a story, go to MargaretPevec.com and click on the “Adultism” link or contact her at Margaret@MargaretPevec.com.