Adultism: The Hidden Toxin Poisoning Our Relationships with Children

As parents or parents-to-be, we commit ourselves to understanding the physical and emotional needs of children. We learn about breastfeeding and its importance to the optimal health of children. We make conscious choices about the foods we provide and the toys we give. We delve into research about child development so we can provide developmentally appropriate experiences for the children in our lives.
We think and reflect on our childhoods and imagine how we might do things differently than our parents, or perhaps the same as our parents. If you were like me, you may have spent time thinking about how to raise a boy to be in this world so that he would not become sexist. Since we are a multi-racial family, I thought about how I could help him to understand who he was in the context of race and culture. We might be committed to creating sustainable lives for children and future generations, so we consciously make choices for our families to support our values.

Most often, however, we do little as parents to understand the broader social and cultural dynamics that inform our views on children, childhood, and the institution of parenting. Our dominant cultural paradigm of children and parenting is one based on fear, control and domination. We use schools, churches, even parenting, to deny the basic rights of children to be treated with respect and trust. We are a culture whose view of parenting, children, and childhood is rooted in adulthood. Adultism is the silent, hidden toxin in our child-adult relationships and in our culture.

What is adultism?

My favorite explanation of adultism comes from an article written by Dr. Barry Checkoway at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. I had the opportunity to briefly work with him when I co-directed the Program on Intergroup Relations there and find his description not only defines adultism, but also illuminates how it operates.

In his article Adults as Allies, he defines adultism as “…all of the behaviors and attitudes that flow from the assumption that adults are better than young people, and are entitled to act upon young people in many ways without their agreement.” He goes on to say that, (e)xcept for prisoners and a few other institutionalized groups, young people’s lives are more controlled than those of any other group in society. In addition, adults reserve the right to punish, threaten, hit, take away ‘privileges,’ and ostracize young people when they consider it beneficial in controlling them or “disciplining” them. If this were a description of the way a group of adults were treated, society would quickly recognize it as a form of oppression.

Adults, however, generally do not consider adultism to be oppressive, because this is the way they themselves were treated as youth; the process has been internalized.

The essence of adultism is that young people are not respected. Instead, they are less important and, in a sense, inferior to adults. They cannot be trusted to develop correctly, so they must be taught, disciplined, harnessed, punished, and guided into the adult world. The liberation of young people will require the active participation of adults. A good starting place is to consider
and understand how we – today’s adults – were mistreated and devalued when we were children and youth, and how we consequently act in adultist ways now. (1)

Adultism impacts all relationships between adults and children in our culture. It impacts how we view children. It impacts how we treat them and what we feel we have the right to do as parents. It is institutionalized in schools, churches, and our legal and medical systems.

I have spent over two decades working towards social justice in higher education. It took five years after becoming a parent to realize that the oppression I fought outside of my home was deeply entrenched inside my own home in my relationship with the first child in my life. I began to see how my use of power and control over him and my domination of him were planting the seeds for oppression and discrimination to be perpetuated by him or upon him as he grew older. Adultism creates fertile ground for all other forms oppression to exist.

Our relationships with children from the time they are born create a paradigm from which they will view and experience the world. This is the nature of socialization or enculturation. (2) Because the majority of us experience domination and control as children, we feel it is normal, even if we fought against this injustice as children and teenagers.

This socialization subconsciously operates to inform the ways we view children and our role as parents. The belief that adults have the right to exercise control over children is perpetuated by deeply-ingrained cultural beliefs about the nature of childhood. Throughout our lives, we are bombarded with information about how our culture views the world. (3) This information includes history, habits, and traditions, but it also include biases, stereotypes, and prejudices about groups of people, including children. (4)

We create, or construct, a view of children that rationalizes control and domination because our culture defines children in contrast to adults. We use adults as the norm from which we measure the actions of children. We define their differences as deficiencies that must be overcome through a long socialization process carried our by parents, teachers, schools, and other individuals and institutions. (5)

The socialization process is about using our greater institutional (or structural) power over children to ensure they do what we believe is right as adults. There was a time when I believed that because my values and beliefs were often outside of the mainstream (natural childbirth, extended breastfeeding, co-sleeping, no use of physical punishment) using my power over the children in my life was acceptable because I had rejected dominant values. What I fooled myself into believing was that my parenting was better because I had carefully considered and chosen
alternatives to the mainstream. And yet, what I had not eliminated was the most fundamental and harmful belief in our culture, that adults have the right to use their power over children.

This power-over paradigm teaches children to question themselves and rely on authority figures to make decisions for them and to tell them what is right. The need for autonomy and self-determination is sacrificed to the need for order and productivity. Indoctrination into this kind of world-view is easier if the power of children is dismissed and disregarded. We may be indoctrinating them in alternative values, but the use of power in and of itself, is harmful and serves the dominant culture.

The loss of our inner authority and voice in childhood creates fertile ground for our institutions to teach us that using power over others is the only way in which our society can flourish, be productive and succeed. This is how adultism creates fertile ground for all other forms of discrimination and oppression to flourish in our society. We normalize the more powerful (adults) controlling the less powerful (children) to get them to do what we believe is right. Because the end does not justify the means, whatever that belief is doesn’t matter. It is the way we use power and the way we treat children that matters.

In our own lives, even if we fight against racial injustice, even if we fight for world peace, even if we fight for a sustainable world, if we are using our power over the children in our lives, we are perpetuating injustice and oppression. We are setting children up to accept a world that is based on the more powerful controlling the less powerful.

When I came to realize this, I began to understand why social justice work was so difficult. By the time I began to work with college students to help them understand how racism, sexism, heterosexism, or ableism operated in our society, they had already experienced 20 years of domination and control. They accepted this as normal, because as we all do, we want our parents’ love and approval. At the time I didn’t make the connection between adultism and all other forms of oppression. However, I have since come to understand that it is the missing link.

If we are to create broader social change, create a world where justice is a fundamental value, we must challenge ourselves to unlearn the adultism we were subject to as children and internalized as adults. We must challenge ourselves to question our own authority and power, not just the power and authority of big corporations or corrupt governments.

We must ask ourselves, “How do I mirror the injustice in the world in my relationships with the children in my life?” “How can I live my life so that my actions and my beliefs are congruent?” Not just in the values I espouse, but in the small actions I take everyday with those who are the least
powerful in my life. We can create the change we want to see in the world. To do this, we must start with the most important relationship we have as parents, and that is with the child in our life. If we can fundamentally eliminate adultism in those relationships this generation of children will see the world through different eyes.

More importantly, they will act on this new world-view. If they have not experienced what it feels like to be dehumanized, dismissed, and marginalized as children, they will not feel the need to perpetuate injustice on others as they grow more powerful in the world. If they have experienced trust, respect and mutuality as their paradigm, they will be the change our world needs. This change, this challenge to all of us, begins with our own internal work as parents to reject and eliminate adultism in all its forms in our own homes and in the lives of children.

(Read Part 2, Adultism: The Unlearning.)

3. Harro, 16
4. ibid

Category: social justice, transforming childhood

← Unlearning Adultism

4 Comments on “Adultism: The Hidden Toxin Poisoning Our Relationships with Children”

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Carl
January 4, 2017

It occurs to me that adultism is a form of bullying — the first lessons children get in how to be a bully. Somehow I lucked out and avoided being a victim of adultism.

Although this is the first time I've heard of the term adultism, it is certainly something I've been aware of most of my life, including when I was a kid. I'm thankful that my parents never practiced adultism while raising me, and that I have avoided falling into habits of adultism myself. When I was a kid, I used to feel sad for other kids who were victims of adultism, and I was puzzled and dismayed whenever I observed adults victimizing kids in this manner, because it seemed so obvious to me that such oppression wasn't good. If other adults tried to oppress me with adultism, I pretty much ignored and avoided them. I wasn't treated that way at home and I wasn't going to put up with it anywhere else, either. Interestingly, though, that didn't happen to me very much, for whatever reason. A few of the teachers we had in school used adultism as a way to manage students, but even there I almost never found any of that treatment directed at me.

Reply

Yana
February 4, 2017

Great article! I love it!
What's your translation policy? I live and work in Bulgaria with Bulgarian families and would love to translate these two articles in Bulgarian.

Reply

Teresa Graham Brett
September 3, 2017

Sorry for my slow reply. Please feel free to translate. Other articles from my site have been translated and all I ask is that you provide a link back and attribute. Thank you!
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Teresa Graham Brett's book, Parenting for Social Change, is my favorite for explaining and supporting with research how authoritarian parenting affects our children and how we can live in a partnership-based parenting paradigm instead.

~Anjelika

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