In part one of this article, I introduced the idea that the dominant belief system in our culture around parenting is one based on adultism. Adultism is defined 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.” (1) I also described the broader societal framework that operates to disempower children and how this disempowerment sets the stage for other forms of oppression and discrimination to be perpetuated.
In this second part of my article, I want to explore the manifestations of adultism in our culture and how, as parents and adults, we need to unlearn adultism in order to establish relationships with children based on mutual respect, trust, and freedom. Unlearning adultism also allows us to heal from our own past experiences as children who were controlled and disempowered in our culture.

What Does Adultism Look Like?

A paradigm of control fundamentally supports adultism. We believe that control must be imposed on children for their own good. If we practice gentle discipline and avoid physical punishment, we may believe we are not controlling parents. I was definitely one of those parents. I never believed I was a controlling parent until I was forced to examine my behavior from a different perspective, and specifically from the child's perspective.

The control we exert over children manifests itself in almost all aspects of their lives. We'll explore just a few of those areas. One prime aspect of children's lives where control is harmful is in the expression of emotions. When children are expressing their emotions and we become uncomfortable with how they are expressing them or what they are saying, we might respond with some of the following statements.

“Ok, you've cried enough, now it's time to stop.”
“Life isn't fair, so you might as well get used to it.”
“I'll give you something to cry about.”
“Big boys don't cry.”
“Well, she's just going through the terrible twos.”
“You know how teenagers are...moody all the time.”

I will often hear these statements made in public places by adults to children or about children. We also might control children's emotional expressions in more subtle ways by “shushing” them. Our culture will often justify this control over emotional expressions by perpetuating the myth that we must control children in order for them to learn self-control. However, the unintentional message and impact of this kind of control may be far more negative than we believe.

When a child is allowed to express all emotions, including sadness and anger, the emotions dissipate and the child is better able to make sense of the experience. By controlling how a child expresses his emotions, we require him to suppress them. This suppression of emotions doesn't allow the child to integrate the experience and make sense of it.
When he experiences a similar distressing situation in the future, he relives the suppressed emotions of the past experience. We set up an emotional loop that becomes a pattern of behavior that is difficult to overcome. He is triggered by similar circumstances in the future—even as an adult—because the experience hasn't been effectively integrated. (2) And, more importantly (or harmful) is that he may not even be aware of this cycle of unintegrated emotions.

Beyond emotional expressions, we control how children interact socially. We believe that children learn politeness when we say to them, “what's the magic word?” Or if they are given a gift and don't immediately say thank you, we will say “what do you say?” We are encouraged as parents (and this is often reinforced by other parents and adults) to force children to apologize to each other. We are also expected as parents to force children to learn to share.

Let's look at this from the child's perspective. I'm busy playing with a stick I found at the park. It's a very cool stick. I can pretend that it's lots of different things. Another kid comes along and decides he wants the stick. He takes it from me. I punch him. My parent sees me punch him and I am told I should have shared the stick and I need to apologize. Do I learn empathy or compassion in this scenario? Or, do I learn that I can be forced to say something I don't believe to be true or I will face the disapproval of my parent whom I need and want to love me.

When we force children to share or to apologize, we may believe that they are learning a lesson about caring and sharing. What children learn in these instances is not politeness. They learn what it feels like to be controlled by someone who is more powerful. They learn that children can be coerced by adults, who rudely (and disrespectfully) force them to say and do things that are disingenuous. And this is all for sake of learning to be polite and caring. The hypocrisy of this treatment is not lost on children or teenagers, even if they might call it something else besides hypocrisy.

Adultism operates in our culture when we judge a child’s behavior by a different standard than we might judge an adult’s behavior. For example, children are often described as “master manipulators.” Adults will remark upon how a child has an adult wrapped around her little finger. We believe that children are trying to manipulate us into doing what they want by crying, throwing a “temper tantrum” or whining.

The reality is children manipulate and adults manipulate. What are we doing when we manipulate another person? We are doing our best to get our needs or wants met. If we feel unheard, if we think someone will not want to do what we want, we might use techniques to manipulate them. When a child manipulates an adult to get what she needs or wants, we
believe we need to eliminate that behavior. When we manipulate a child to get her to eat (or not eat) a certain food we call ourselves good parents. When we manipulate a child to share the swing by threatening to leave the park, we are using “natural consequences.” We hide the reality of our behavior under the cloak of responsible parenting, not manipulation and coercion.

As parents, our manipulations might be covert as well. We might manipulate a child’s environment by controlling what comes into the house. I might decide as a parent that we will only watch educational television or not allow certain kinds of video games. When we manipulate environments we are limiting and controlling children. We obviously know this as parents. We are setting “appropriate” limits and boundaries. However, our manipulation is much more than this.

Manipulation is an attempt to control the ways people think so that they will come to the conclusions that we want them to come to. (3) We don’t trust children to learn from the world and come to the place we want them to be, so we manipulate their environments so they will become what we want or think what we want them to think.

What I hope to provoke in our growth process as parents is an examination of the ways that we view childhood and children. This worldview strongly affects our perception of their behavior. If we view children as needing to be controlled and tamed, then we’ll see their behavior as manipulative and seek to control it. When we see children outside of this frame of reference we can see that their “manipulation” is a manifestation of the lack of power children have to effect the change they need in their lives and get their needs met.

Unlearning Adultism

In my professional and personal experience, I have met few individuals who did not experience control as children. Adultism is a very common experience for a child growing up in our culture. Because it is so common, we come to see it as normal and accepted. Even if we fought against it as children and teenagers, we will most often move into adulthood not questioning our right to control children.

To unlearn adultism, we must actively challenge our worldview. We have to engage in what is referred to as transformative learning. (4) In this learning process we challenge our assumptions about childhood. We engage in a process that opens up our current worldview and transforms our understanding of childhood and the role of parents and adults.
As we grow up, we make meaning of the world through our experiences. When something happens to us, we expect the same thing to happen again in the future. We develop a frame of reference based on these experiences. We adopt values, beliefs, and behaviors through living our daily lives. This is how cultural expectations are passed on from one generation to the next. Most often, we absorb them without any critical examination. (5)

To open up and transform our frame of reference or worldview we must critically examine what we believe to normal or true based on the values, beliefs, and behaviors we have absorbed. We move away from how we were socialized and begin to develop a differentiated set of values and beliefs. We then begin to act on those new values and beliefs. This is an abstract description of the transformative learning process.

In my work with parents, and in my own unlearning process (or transformative learning process), I had to explore those ways that I had experienced disempowerment as a child and what that meant for me as an adult. There were instances in which those experiences prompted me to vow to myself that I would never use physical punishment, for example. However, because I had not questioned the fundamental worldview I had internalized from experiencing adulthood, I still believed control was a necessary parenting tool.

The steps in my process that have brought a deeper understanding and unlearning of adultism consisted of me having some critical incidents, such as watching myself on a video recording interacting with Martel when he was five. Or, being so angry, I yelled around a doorway and Greyson, then 18 months old, ran away screaming in terror. Though they did not involve hitting, those incidents were wake-up moments that led me to understand that I had deep work to do to overcome my past experiences.

I had to discover that when I was triggered by something Martel or Greyson did and reacted very strongly with anger or frustration, I was experiencing unintegrated emotions from my own childhood. I was reliving my own past traumas, but didn't know it. I began to journal, write articles, read research, explore other parent's experiences and create accountability for myself as a human being to overcome my past experiences.

I had to face the disempowerment I experienced as a child and the resulting fear I had as a parent and adult. By facing these feelings, I began to integrate them and make sense of all the experiences I had as a child. I could begin to accept what I had experienced as a child in a healthy way so that I could create relationships with Martel and Greyson that weren't founded on beliefs that control, domination, and oppression are normal and expected experiences for children.
I also began to understand that the experience I had with my parents was not unique. Our family was typically dysfunctional. We mirrored the broader dynamics in our culture. It helped me to see the ways in which our institutions and social structures reinforce parental control and domination of children. My parents, just like me, were products of their own socialization process as children. Yes, they were accountable for their behavior, just as I am, but I could begin to move beyond the feelings of blame and anger toward them.

The unlearning process is never ending. Each day presents us with an opportunity to challenge our assumptions and beliefs. When a child in our life does something that makes us uncomfortable, we can challenge the assumption that it is because they have done something wrong. Perhaps it is our perspective that needs to change. Perhaps we have past experiences and feelings that we are unconsciously reliving.

If we are committed to freedom and liberation from adultism, we must engage in this transformation process that requires a variety of processes, skills, knowledge and tools. When we change our everyday behavior to reflect and reinforce the internal change process, we begin to also change how, where, and when we focus our energy and time.

Where as before we may have been focused on the behaviors of children that didn't fit into our socialized notions of how they should behave, we can shift our frame of reference so that we offer children the opportunity to explore the world around them, make meaning of their experiences in the world, and create a deeper understanding of who they are and what they want from this life.

Children are on that journey for themselves. We walk alongside them in their journey, providing support, encouragement, trust, and respect in their ability to discover and to create the life that is best for them. As adults, we are also on that journey for ourselves. Being parents enhances the journey we are on. We can heal from our experiences as children and discover the life we want to have liberated from the control we experienced as children. We engage in this process for ourselves and for the children in our lives, with the belief that we can create broader change in the world.


5. ibid.

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Gerborg

June 25, 2016

Hey!

I find your articles very inspiring on my journey to respectful parenting – especially as I have found myself in the exact authoritarian situations that you are describing and until now didn't know how to approach them. Apart from consciously living family life as we already do, are there exercises one can do in order to unwrap the inner scars?

All the best!

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https://www.parentingforsocialchange.com/unlearning-adultism/
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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