Let's Talk About Adultism

8/7/2017

1 COMMENT
Hey Everyone,

There's something that's been on our minds and we think it's time we had a chat. As people dedicated to equity and anti-oppression, we've noticed an alarming surge in adultist language and behaviors in our communities, and yes, that includes our social justice oriented communities.

Adultism is the system of oppression that benefits adults over children. Adultism often manifests as adults controlling different aspects of children's lives such as the food they eat, who they are able to interact with, when they are allowed to go to the bathroom, and how they must spend their time. Adultism takes away children's right to have an opinion over what happens to them and to be able to make decisions for themselves.
As people dedicated to creating a more inclusive, less oppressive society, we recognize our language holds a lot of weight. The words we use can either perpetuate oppressive ideology or be used as a tool of liberation. Over the years, as our communities have begun to retire oppressive language, such as ableist (https://thoughtcatalog.com/parker-marie-molloy/2013/10/15/crazy-examples-of-insanely-ableist-language/), sexist (https://www.uwec.edu/usenate/ExecRecord/130402GenderInclusiveExamples.pdf), and homophobic (http://www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/linguistics/thats-so-gay-homophobic-language-and-school) insults (among many others), we have noticed people replacing those phrases with language that upholds adultism. Examples of adultist language are calling someone a "baby" when they're feeling lots of emotions, saying someone is acting "like a child" when they are being selfish or immature.

In his piece, "Adults as Allies", Barry Checkoway explains that (https://www.parentingforsocialchange.com/adultism-hidden-toxin-poisoning-relationships-children/), "(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."

This system of oppression is rarely recognized, even in social justice spaces - partially because it is so normalized in our society. Currently, 22 U.S. states allow and enforce corporal punishment (http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/04/12/521944429/where-corporal-punishment-is-still-used-its-roots-go-deep) in public schools, meaning children can and are physically punished by teachers, principals, or other school staff for “perceived” misbehavior. This could be as simple as a cell phone ringing in class, a child talking “out of turn,” or chewing gum in class. If this were any other group, people would be outraged by this type of treatment. In fact, "corporal punishment of adults has been banned in U.S. prisons and military training facilities. And every state has animal cruelty laws that criminalize beating animals so long and hard that it causes injury—even while allowing students to be subject to corporal punishment" (National Women's Law Center (https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Corporal-Punishment-Sign-On-Letter.pdf)).
While working in public schools in Missouri, Devon witnessed multiple incidences of teachers threatening students with physical punishment if they did not comply. This practice was mostly witnessed in the elementary special education classrooms. At these schools, if parents did NOT want corporal punishment used on their child, they had to write a letter to the school each year to specify that.


The guiding principles (http://www.childrensrightswales.org.uk/uncrc-principles.aspx) of this convention are:

- It is the State's obligation to protect children from any form of discrimination and to take positive action to promote their rights.
Let's Talk About Adultism - Art for Ourselves

- All actions concerning the child shall take full account of [their] best interests. The State shall provide the child with adequate care when parents, or others charged with that responsibility, fail to do so.
- Every child has the inherent right to life, and the State has an obligation to ensure the child's survival and development.
- The child has the right to express his or her opinion freely and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child.

A U.S. group from Parentsrights.org who oppose the ratification of The Convention on the Rights of the Child (http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx) fear that “ratifying the treaty would mean children could choose their own religion, that children would have a legally enforceable right to leisure, that nations would have to spend more on children's welfare than national defense, and that a child's 'right to be heard' could trigger a governmental review of any decision a parent made that a child didn't like” (Karen Attiah (https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2014/11/21/why-wont-the-u-s-ratify-the-u-n-s-child-rights-treaty/?utm_term=.cf3e2e964153)).

Our U.S. culture is steeped in adultist behaviors, languages, and practices. Adultism is one of the first ways in which people experience disempowerment and oppression. Children who are targets of adultism often grow into oppressive adults.

Unlike other forms of oppression, the identity of “child” is not a fixed identity - we grow out of childhood into adulthood and often reinforce the same oppression we experienced when we were younger. Many people see this as the “natural way” adults should treat/raise children, when, in reality there are ways to live with children and support and care for children in a respectful manner that upholds their rights as human beings.

Even if you don't have children or even interact with children regularly, your language and behaviors still matter. Recently there have been so many examples of adultist language being used in reference to the current president.

Personally, we saw twitter, FB, and IG posts putting down #45 by comparing him to a child. This is problematic, not because the president isn't a selfish, corrupt fool, but because children are not. Children are intelligent, creative, intuitive and capable of seeing the world in ways that many of us adults miss. They are natural learners and problem solvers and we can all learn so much from them.

Alison Gopnik, a child development expert and child right’s activist noticed this trend and stepped in with her piece, “4-Year-Olds Don’t Act Like Trump” (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/20/opinion/sunday/4-year-olds-children-trump-gopnik.html?mcubz=0). In it, she writes:

“The scientific developmental research of the past 30 years shows that Mr. Trump is utterly unlike a 4-year-old.

Four-year-olds care deeply about the truth.

Four-year-olds are insatiably curious.

Four-year-olds can pay attention.

Four-year-olds understand the difference between fantasy and reality.

Four-year-olds have a “theory of mind,” an understanding of their own minds and those of others.
Four-year-olds, contrary to popular belief, are not egocentric or self-centered. In fact, children as young as 1½ demonstrate both empathy and altruism: They will rush to comfort someone who is hurt, and they will spontaneously go out of their way to help someone. Four-year-olds have a strong moral sense.

Four-year-olds are sensitive to social norms and think that they and other people should obey them.*

So next time you feel like calling someone whose behaviors you disagree with “a baby,” take a moment to check yourself and reflect on whether the words you are about to speak are oppressive to any group of people. We believe you are smart and creative enough to find a more true and precise word to express your feelings. Remember, all oppression is interconnected and we cannot dismantle one separately from the rest. When we try to do this, we end up still oppressing some while liberating others. What we're working towards is liberation of all beings.

Resources:

- 10 HABITS THAT INFRINGE ON RIGHTS OF CHILDREN (AND HOW TO CHANGE THEM)  
  (http://lulastic.co.uk/activism/10-habits-that-infringe-on-rights-of-children-and-how-to-change-them/)

- Why won't the U.S. ratify the U.N.'s child rights treaty?  

- Convention on the Rights of the Child  

- 4-Year-Olds Don’t Act Like Trump  
  (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/20/opinion/sunday/4-year-olds-children-trump-gopnik.html?mcubz=0) By Alison Gopnik

- Adultism: The Hidden Toxin Poisoning  

- 15 Crazy Examples Of Insanely Ableist Language  
  (https://thoughtcatalog.com/parker-marie-mollo/2013/10/15-crazy-examples-of-insanely-ableist-language/) By Parker Marie Molloy

- Examples and Alternatives of Sexist/Gendered Language  
  (https://www.uwec.edu/usenate/ExecRecord/130402GenderInclusiveExamples.pdf)

- An Open Letter to Local and State Educational Agencies & Policymakers  

http://www.artforourselves.org/wtf-is-going-on/lets-talk-about-adultism
Nice job you two! It’s great to see your insights and experience being put into words which hopefully many others will read, give some thought to and pass onto others. thanks!

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