



**GET THE
WORD OUT!**



Critical Input from Young People

The information contained in our series of booklets was compiled as a direct result of several years of informal research, with input from more than 600 young people worldwide. Young people played an integral role in the creation and editing of these booklets.

What to Keep in Mind When Reading this Booklet

The most important idea to keep in mind while using this booklet series is that the key role of adults is to assist and support young people. Young people are inherently intelligent, cooperative and caring. When they are given space and encouragement, they will flourish. Many adults have put great effort into learning how to assist young people. These are some guidelines that have been used effectively.



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Get the Word Out! Going Public About Young People's Power

Over the past few years, people have begun to understand that young people's voices need to be heard and acted on more consistently. Those who understand that young people can help improve society and offer solutions to community problems, are putting the concept of youth power into action. Engaged in the solution process, young people have become much more influential participants in many programs and agencies and have had a positive influence on bettering their communities and society at large.

However, a major obstacle that stands in the way of involving young people in decision making is the oppression of young people (see definition in glossary), also known as adultism, the stereotyping of young people based on their age. Even people who truly believe in giving voice to youth are sometimes timid about ending the oppression of young people, and become bashful about helping young people take real power.

Adults and young people who support youth involvement have done an excellent job of talking about these ideas in our schools, at work and whenever we get a chance. Now is the time to take this movement public and address it like racism and sexism. Some people will disagree and feel uncomfortable about the movement to raise awareness about the oppression of young people. But keep this in mind when doubts overshadow your beliefs: people have had objections to every major liberation movement throughout history, and ending adultism is no different.

This booklet explores the reasons why young people should be decision makers, details the oppression that keeps them from being actively involved, and offers various tips and exercises that can help both young people and adults think strategically about ending young people's oppression.

Adult Allies: Adult allies are adults who advocate for and support young people. These adults work hard to assist young people with their lives, support them, help them out when they struggle, remind them of how important they are, and let them know that change is possible.

Agents of Young People's Oppression: Young people's oppression is no one's fault. However, adults are put in the position of being agents of young people's oppression. As parents, teachers, and adults in young people's lives there is a delicate balance between helping young people grow and flourish, setting limits, and holding young people back by expressing adultism towards them.

Liberation: Liberation is simply the freedom from oppression. Both young people and adult allies need to speak out about ending the stereotyping of young people.

Oppression: Oppression is the systematic mistreatment of an identifiable group of people in society and/or another group of people who serve as agents of the society, with the mistreatment encouraged or reinforced by society or its culture.

Oppression of Young People, i.e. Adultism: Young people are systematically mistreated and disrespected by society, with adults as the agents of the oppression. The basis of young people's oppression is disrespect. Manifestations of the oppression include: systematic invalidation, denial of voice or respectful attention ("Not right now, dear, I don't have time."), physical abuse, lack of information ("Don't worry about it, you wouldn't understand anyway."), misinformation, denial of any power, economic dependency, lack of rights (parents can take money from young people's bank accounts without their consent), lack of high expectations, and any combination of the above.

Glossary of Terms

The basis of young people's oppression is disrespect.

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Why Young People Should Be Decision Makers

There are many reasons young people should be decision makers to improve their own schools, lives, and communities. Below are some primary reasons to involve youth; a more detailed description of these ideas can be found in the Youth on Board publication *14 Points: Successfully Involving Youth in Decision Making*.

It's a diversity issue. Even though they may not have years of formal experience, youth offer intelligence, creative thinking, and a valuable outlook on the world that is seldom introduced into the governance of organizations.

It's a democracy issue. To make a democracy work, all people need to be heard. This includes the voices of young people. We need to hear their views, ideas, and passions and act on their ideas for democracy to thrive in future generations.

It's a bottom-line issue. Young people are uniquely qualified to say what works for young people. By relying on young decision makers to provide personal insights, talk with friends, and organize youth focus groups, organizations can save time and money by catching decisions that might not work well with young people before they are enacted and fail.

It's a civil rights issue. Nowhere in the United States Declaration of Independence is there a stipulation concerning age. "All men are created equal," all are entitled to "certain unalienable rights." In far too many situations, young people are not being heard. Their rights are being disregarded or violated, and adults do not seem to hear or care about it.

It's a youth development issue. Leadership helps young people develop confidence in their opinions and ideas. In addition to fostering confidence, participating as a leader can introduce youth to a range of other skills—public speaking, budgeting, leading projects and committees, and networking, to name a few. By creating visible youth decision-making positions, you can impact the self-esteem of young people in your organization and throughout your community.

It's a long-term growth issue. Adding young people to the governance of an aging organization can usher in a new generation of leadership.

It's an organizational culture issue. Youth can enliven the atmosphere of your organization by bringing energy, enthusiasm, and interactive work processes. They often remind us that work and fun are not mutually exclusive. Techniques like small group discussions or brainstorming encourage teamwork and foster better communication.

It's a community outreach issue. Young people bring an entirely new community of contacts to your organization. By adding youth to your decision making body, you are expanding your circle of clients, constituents, or consumers, and adding to their understanding of your group.

It's an integrity issue. It is important for any organization to involve its constituents. Just as it would not make sense for the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to be run exclusively by Caucasians, it does not make sense for youth-serving organizations to be run exclusively by adults.

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Oppression Of Young People Is No One's Fault

The primary reason young people are not included is young people's oppression, also called adultism. The oppression of young people is no one's fault. Adults are not to be blamed for the stereotyping of young people or held responsible for ending it alone.

Defining Adultism

To help us understand adultism, consider these examples of adultism created by active young people. What do the examples have in common? Why does this happen? Look at the following examples to see if you recognize the adultist behavior described.

Example 1: Writing "Maria, age 17" rather than "Maria Ortiz." While it's great to demonstrate that young people are involved, you should be very careful to not be condescending. Adults would never write "Jim, age 54" in a professional setting.

Example 2: Considering only age, not experience. Young people's experiences are extremely valuable, even if they are not traditional professional experiences.

Example 3: Asking young people "Do you understand?" in a condescending way. It's great to be thoughtful when someone looks lost, whether an adult or a young person, but be careful not to put young people on the spot.

Example 4: Assuming young people won't be able to understand a topic or concept rather than taking the time to explain it to them.

Example 5: Making condescending comments like "You're still a little wet behind the ears!" "When you grow up you'll understand." "It's just a phase; you'll grow out of it."

Example 6: Asking young people to handle only small or menial tasks. As with an adult, these need to be balanced with important and challenging work.

Example 7: Being surprised when young people say something intelligent, when they are dressed appropriately, or when they are well organized. Comments like, "You're so smart! I can't believe you're only fifteen!"

Example 8: Assuming that young people only know about issues concerning youth.

Example 9: Ignoring young people when you are busy with "more important things."

Example 10: Using jargon that is unfamiliar to young people. Help young people learn the language used in your field. In the meantime remember to phrase things so everyone can understand.

Your definition of "adultism":

It's great to be thoughtful when someone looks lost, whether an adult or a young person, but be careful not to put young people on the spot.



While it's great to demonstrate that young people are involved, you should be very careful to not be condescending.



Ways To Fight Young People's Oppression

Now that we have explored some of the reasons why young people should be decision makers, and how young people's oppression gets in the way, we can now further explore the ways to fight young people's oppression, either as allies to young people or as young people.

We have developed great insights about oppression in general and particularly about young people's oppression. Let's conquer our timidity and carefulness and share these insights more actively. Here are some thoughts on how we can do that and help others do the same.

Call young people "people." Instead of describing young people as if their age was who they were, try using the word people, or the word friend. Some examples: Try saying "I saw two people playing hopscotch," instead of "I saw two young people playing hopscotch." Or, "I have two friends next door," instead of "I have two little friends next door." Or, "There were three people in that van," instead of "There were three kids in that van."

Our language is an extremely effective way to raise awareness. By carefully phrasing our words, we can begin to think of young people as people, instead of defining them by their age and leaving room for stereotypes based on what people think they know about young people.

Appreciate people. People change and become more open to learning about young people's oppression when we let them know we are on their side. We want to avoid criticizing people for their actions. Instead we want to assist them by modeling correct behavior. Sincerely appreciate and notice the ways that adults are good allies to young people. For example, "I noticed the way that you listened to LaTanya and supported her when her teacher was being unfair." Also notice and appreciate the ways those young people take power and support each other. For instance, "I saw the way you would not let Greg speak badly of Maria in front of her friends. It's great that you can do that."

People usually do not insult others intentionally. Before attempting to correct someone, you should first remember that they might not realize the oppressiveness of how they address young people. You might first stop and appreciate things about someone that you like, before attempting to guide them. Sincerely appreciating people is one of the best ways to get people on your side, besides being a lot of fun.

Pay attention to people. Before you begin to give people who might not agree with you information about young people's oppression and young people taking power, stop and notice everything that you can about them. Notice how good, intelligent, and capable they are. Also notice the areas where they struggle. How do they hold their bodies? What are their facial expressions? Where do they look scared? If you remember to think well about people, it will be much easier for you to keep thinking and also for them to listen to you.

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Get adults talking and laughing about their childhood. If adults remember things about what it was like for them to be young, they can step outside of their adult role and more easily take in information about young people's liberation.

Exercise: Usually this works best as a warm-up to a conversation or a workshop. Here are some questions that may be useful (you can also invent your own). Answer only the questions you are comfortable with:

- Who was your worst teacher?
- Who did you have the biggest crush on?
- What kinds of clothes did you wear?
- What's a secret that you never told anyone?
- What was the most disgusting habit you had?
- What was the most powerful moment you remember having?
- What was your most embarrassing moment?
- What was the thing you most wanted to change about yourself?
- What was your main source of information about sex?
- Who were your best friends? What were they like?
- Who was the adult you trusted most or who most understood you? What was s/he like? Did s/he know how much s/he made a difference in your life?
- When you were young, what negative comments did adults give you?
- What was your mother's main complaint about you? Your father's? Do you ever recognize that in your life now?
- One thing you had forgotten about your childhood? One thing you will never forget?¹

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¹ Adapted from exercise by the Oakland Men's Project.

Get people to brainstorm about the negative messages young people hear. Help people find young people's oppression in their lives. General questions, such as "How are/were you oppressed as a young person?" usually flop, until people have a basic understanding. A good strategy to use is to start by asking specific questions to start the discussion.

Exercise: Here are some examples of questions for young people or adults to start a discussion around negative messages. Have you ever had someone say to you:

- "You're too young to understand."
- "Not now, I don't have time."
- "Just wait until you have children."
- "Do as I say, not as I do."
- "Not in my house, you don't!"
- "This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you."
- "Children should be seen and not heard."
- "Don't talk back to me!"
- "Pay attention when I'm talking to you."
- "It's just a stage—you'll grow out of it."
- "Act your age!"
- "Isn't that cute that you have a crush on someone. Oh, she thinks she's in love."

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appreciate
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Get people talking about their lives, then point out how the examples they are bringing up are perfect examples of young people's oppression. The following questions work particularly well with young people. They can also work well with adults, depending on how comfortable they are with the idea of young people taking power. Be thoughtful about who you ask which questions:

- Have you ever been in a store and the cashier waited on the adult behind you first?

- Have you ever had someone follow you around a store thinking that you were going to steal something?
- Wouldn't it be great if young people could hire their own teachers and run their own schools? How would things be different?
- How would the world be different if young people had the right to vote and politicians had to listen to what they say? [People often disagree that young people should have the right to vote. You can explain that the same reasoning was used to stop women and people of color from voting].
- Wouldn't it be great if the jobs young people could get had equal pay to the jobs that adults can get?
- How would the world look different if young people had enough money to buy cars and rent apartments?
- What would happen if every time an adult hit a young person the young person could tell the adult to stop and not fear further abuse?
- What if every bathroom had appliances low enough for shorter people?

Explain adultism directly. As we have previously defined, adultism, also known as the oppression of young people, is the oppression of young people based on the lack of respect for children as complete human beings. Although many of us have seen the stereotyping of young people in practice, we often have not considered it an oppression.

Exercise: Brainstorm the places where you see young people's oppression in the world. Take each of

the categories—systematic invalidation, denial of voice, etc.—and brainstorm examples. For example, denial of voice: “Be seen and not heard.”

Assist young people in speaking about young people's oppression. Allies need to speak on behalf of young people and young people's liberation, but this is never a substitute for, or as effective as, young people speaking about themselves and their oppression. Make sure young people are at every meeting, especially where young people's issues are being discussed. Help them think ahead of time about what they want to say. Remind them that they have a lot to say. Set up situations where they get to talk about their lives. Ask them to answer some of the questions from #5 in mixed groups. Encourage them to talk to their friends and support them when it gets difficult.

Know about young people's internalized oppression. Young people are made to accept the myth about themselves, and about other young people, that they are less than fully human. They feel like they don't have anything important to say, or feel like they have to wait until they get older to act on their ideas. This influences them to treat each other with disrespect and to act out young people's oppression among themselves, without adults even needing to be present. Young people target each other for standing out from the norm in any way—for getting good grades, for wearing shoes that aren't in style, etc. They forget to value each other. This mutual disrespect and mistreatment is internalized oppression.



Although many of us have seen the stereotyping of young people in practice, we often have not considered it an oppression.



Allies need to speak on behalf of young people and young people's liberation...

Exercise #1: Questions to begin discussion around young people's internalized oppression:

- What can't you stand about other young people?
- Have you ever been in a fight, verbal or physical? What was it about? How did you feel afterwards?
- Do you fight with your brothers and sisters? What is it like?
- Have you ever felt less cool, or been made fun of by other young people? How did it feel? What was it about?
- Have you ever felt more cool, or made fun of other young people? How did it feel? What was it about? (Be honest.)

Exercise #2: Try getting young people to say "It's great being young!" and jump up and down. This pushes them against the place where they're not fully proud of being young. People may feel embarrassed. Once you get this going, people will laugh and it can be a lot of fun. Your enthusiasm will make all the difference.

Gently get adults to identify places where they have become agents of young people's oppression. We try hard to treat young people well and not act out the hurtful messages that run through our heads sometimes. This is of course not how we want to be acting or thinking so we need safe places to laugh with people and admit what runs in our heads. This is the first step in getting free from those messages. The following questions and exercise work best if the questions above are done first. Both of the following things can be done in either workshops or in informal conversations.

Exercise: Get adults to laugh about all the places where they have a hard time around young people.

Ask them the question, "What can't you stand about young people?" You need to model a very light tone in doing this. Assist them to see how these things are similar to what people couldn't stand about them when they were younger. You can do this in a stand up/sit down game with specific questions, like "Stand up if you hate it when young people..."

- Play loud music on trains
- Gossip about each other
- Ignore you or laugh at you
- Don't show up even though they promised you one hour ago that they'd be there
- Steal things from you
- Throw things at your car
- Other things

Good questions to ask:

- What are your earliest memories of noticing that young people were not given the same respect as adults?
- Tell about a time that you did not give young people your full respect. It can be a subtle way, like being "too busy" to listen to what they had to say, or something as obvious telling someone to sit down and shut up because you said so.
- Talk about a time when you were an excellent ally to young people and somehow showed them that they had your full respect.
- Decide to make specific efforts to counter your adultism. A good trial commitment to give to people is "I solemnly promise that I will never again treat any young person with anything less than complete respect, and this means..."²

² Refer to the booklet *Tips from Young People on Good Youth/Adult Relationships* for more information.



Try getting young people to say "It's great being young!" and jump up and down.



Young people are made to accept the myth about themselves, and about other young people, that they are less than fully human.

Not through creating the “enemy.” It does not work to target the “bad people,” i.e. those who speak openly against young people having power, or to label people as “better,” i.e. strong allies. All people are good people - no better than or worse than. We need to make a very clear distinction between the way people may act and people’s complete and inherent goodness.

For example, if someone says something like “Young people should be quiet and learn by listening and not talking,” we may be tempted to get frustrated and walk away. Instead, try listening thoughtfully. In every disagreement there is some common ground. Find it. Our goal is not to alienate people. It is to give them information and welcome them to join us in this wonderful project of ending the oppression of young people. Our goal is to win allies, not to get everyone to agree with us on every part of what we’re saying.

Become experts on parents’ oppression. Parents are often blamed for the oppression of young people. By choosing to become a parent, people are thrown into the role of being the most direct agent of young people’s oppression. Parents’ liberation and young people’s liberation are not in conflict with each other. In fact, they work best together. We need to fight for the rights of parents, while expecting and assisting them to think well about young people’s liberation. See “Bill of Rights for Parents” on page 18.

We don’t know what this liberation movement will look like. Going public about young people’s oppression and liberation is the next step. The installation of every oppression is dependent on young people’s oppression and classism (the oppression of people based on class roles) being solidly in place. Therefore, ending the oppression of young people is a key step towards ending all oppression.

We will need to continue to talk to each other, learn from each other, and support each other. We all need to heal from the ways that young people’s oppression has limited our individual lives. This is exciting work. Let’s go after it and get skilled at doing it. We can have this world look the way we want it to look. The power is in the people, and we are the people!

Review the Bill of Rights for Parents. Parents’ liberation and young people’s liberation work best when they work together. A good exercise for both parents and children is to review the Bill of Rights below, written by Patty Wipfler of the Parents Leadership Institute. Not everyone needs to agree with every statement written here, but this is a great conversational starting point. This exercise is a useful tool to help parents and young people think about parents in society, because you can’t be allies to young people without helping parents. Respect and support for our work as parents can insure a bright future for our children and our society.



Our goal is not to alienate people. It is to give them information and welcome them to join us in this wonderful project of ending the oppression of young people.



Parents’ liberation and young people’s liberation work best when they work together.

Bill of Rights for Parents

We are the primary nurturers of children, our most precious and important resource. We have the right to a society that welcomes young people and responds gladly to their need for adult attention and commitment. We deserve a society that is eager to invest in young people, and in parents as their primary nurturers.

We have the right to raise our children with decent housing, good food, safe neighborhoods, good medical care, quality child care, real education and ample time for relaxed relationships within the family. We have the right to a society that is active in eliminating racism, sexism, and all other forms of oppression which hurt us, limit us, and separate us from each other.

We have the right to respect and support for the working parent. This means:

- We have the right to meaningful preparation for the work of parenting.
- We have the right to economic support while we nurture our children through their first several years of life. We have the right to be paid for the work of parenting.
- We have the right to effective collaboration and support systems as we do the work of parenting.
- We have the right to protection from overwork and overwhelming conditions in the work of parenting.
- We have the right to participate fully in the policies and the work of schools, day care centers, hospitals, recreation departments, justice systems, and every other institution that affects the lives of young people.

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We deserve a society that is eager to invest in young people, and in parents as their primary nurturers.

Review List of Demands by Young People for Young People. Below is a statement written by a group of young people led by Keir Simmons at the University of London. Use this as a discussion starter, to get people thinking about the rights young people expressed. Not everyone needs to agree with every statement written here. This exercise helps people think a little differently about what the world would be like without young people's oppression.

1. All young people who wish to must be allowed to vote.
2. All laws related to age must be removed.
3. Young people are not the property of their parents, and the law must be changed to reflect this.
4. All sexual and physical abuse of young people must stop immediately.
5. Young people must run their own schools.
6. Young people must produce their own TV programs and films.
7. Every young person has the right to food, warmth, shelter and a good education.
8. Buildings with good facilities must be provided in every area, to be run by young people for young people.
9. Architecture and design must consider young people (e.g. toilets, door handles, car interiors, etc.).
10. Young people's economic situation must be improved: There must be worthwhile jobs with worthwhile pay for young workers.

Demands by Young People for Young People

11. The importance of parents, teachers, and other allies to young people must be recognized and rewarded. Good support and pay must be provided for these important workers.
12. All mistreatment of young people by other young people must stop, and must be replaced with complete respect, so that we can unite and achieve these important goals.

Review the Young People’s Commitment. This is for young people to do with each other in pairs. How this is used is by getting into pairs and answering this question, go back and forth in pairs. The exercise is geared to help people think about how they can live a life respecting young people.

“I promise that from this moment forward, I will never again treat any young person, including myself, with anything less than complete respect. This means...”

Conclusion

Have fun! Reading this booklet is the first step toward including youth in every arena. Use these exercises to help guide your discussions about youth power and ending the oppression of young people. Look at this booklet as a starting point to building good relationships between young people and adults and gaining equality for everyone.

YOUTH ON BOARD RESOURCE MATERIAL

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- Booklets** • **Youth on Board: Why and How to Involve Young People in Organizational Decision-Making**
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