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# Adultism

By Paul Kivel

WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE do poorly in school? Why do young people use drugs, or hang out on street corners, or get pregnant? A common answer to these questions is that many teens have low self-esteem, generally defined as a poor sense of one's worth or ability: a lack of confidence. Professional literature about adolescents, social service priorities, and funding trends all emphasize programs which build self-esteem.

## Is the Problem Low Self-Esteem?

When I think back to my years as a teenager I notice how much I wanted to do and how little power I had to do it. I wanted to go places I couldn't; I wanted to try to do things I wasn't supposed to. I wanted to affect and change my classes, my community, my neighborhood, and I wasn't able to. I never had the money, wheels, friends, influence, or credibility to make a difference.

There were lots of promises from adults. If you study hard, work hard, stay clean, stay safe, don't have sex, don't drink or smoke, don't mess up, adults promised you a life filled with power and privileges. But the promise of power 10 or 20 years in the future was not inviting nor convincing. In the meantime, few adults listened to me, or allowed me to participate, or trusted me, or noticed me and my friends and fellow students.

Now, of course, when adults systematically don't notice you, listen to you, trust you or allow you to participate in making meaningful decisions, your sense of self-worth deteriorates. When they grade you continually on your academic performance your concept of your value can hinge on it too. If on top of this they belittle you, punish you arbitrarily, yell at you, put you down, beat you, or molest you, your self-esteem can plummet. And racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression directed at you can eliminate your self-esteem altogether.

## **Oppression: The Issue Is Power**

Our problem as young people was not low self-esteem. Rather, we had no power over our lives. Without power to protect ourselves, we were constantly restricted, disrespected, and abused by adults. At home, at school, in stores, at work, on the sports field, on the streets—adults had the authority to decide how we should dress, how we should talk, where we could be, who we could be with, and who we couldn't. They decided our future, through grades, discipline, records, arrests, report cards, evaluations, allowances, and/or the lack or neglect of all of the above.

Teens face the same lack of power today. Adults make promises to them; adolescence is a time of promise, of open futures, of the possibility of meaningful education, fully-remunerated work, and healthy relationships. The reality is a broken promise: limited education, high un- and underemployment, unplanned families, dysfunctional relationships, and an epidemic of violence.

## **Internalized Oppression**

And teens are still blamed for failure. They are labeled trouble-makers, irresponsible, immature, apathetic, lazy, dishonest, underachievers, and stupid by adults. Adults define this failure as a personal problem for each teen, a failure of self-esteem, and teens end up blaming themselves or attacking each other. Teen violence—the teen-to-teen abuse that happens in gangs, in couples, or from the school bully; the self-abuse from drugs or alcohol; unwanted pregnancy, and suicide—all of these can be seen as forms of learned helplessness and hopelessness in teens, ways that, because of abuse from adults, they have learned to give up on themselves.

To check on the experience of adultism among teenagers, we sometimes use the following visualization in the classroom:

### **Adultism Visualization**

by Allan Creighton

Think of yourself as a young person, pay attention to your feelings as you imagine or remember an adult throwing out the following statements in an increasingly angry and abusive tone:

- Not now. I don't have time



- You're too young to understand.
- We'll talk about it later.
- Go to your room.
- Not until you finish your homework.
- Clean your plate.
- I work my fingers to the bone for you.
- Wait 'til you have children.
- Wait 'til your father gets home.
- When I was your age, I had it a LOT harder.
- Do what I say.
- Not in my house you don't.
- Because I said so.
- Sit up. Sit up straight.
- Don't you talk back to me.
- Is that the best you can do?
- You're just a kid.
- You pay attention when I'm talking to you.
- You're stupid.
- Shut up.
- You show me some respect.
- This hurts me more than it hurts you.
- Don't tell your mother about this; it's just our secret.
- You get right upstairs and change into something decent.
- Turn off the god damned TV.
- Get the hell out of here.
- All right, NOW you're gonna get what's coming to you.
- I brought you into this world, I can take you out.

Notice the feelings and thoughts that came up for you as you read through this list. What do these common expressions say about the way that young people are treated. In a workshop we would often follow this visualization with the following group exercise. You can read through the statements and notice which ones applied to you when you were a young person.

### **Learning the Power Chart**

Adapted from Allan Creighton

Facilitator reads following statements to the group. For each statement, participants are to stand silently if the statement applies to them as young people, notice who's standing, and notice their feelings, whether standing or sitting.



Stand up silently if:

- your dress or appearance was ever criticized or ridiculed by an adult
- you ever felt that your racial or ethnic group, your gender, your religious or cultural heritage or some other group that you are a part of was not represented, was represented inaccurately, or was put down in the curriculum you were taught
- you ever received the message from a teacher, a student, or an administrator that people like you were not normal, were lazy, were not intelligent, or were otherwise different or inferior and therefore not deserving of full respect
- you ever received the message that there was something different and wrong about your family, that it wasn't normal, or that your family was inferior because of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or other kinds of difference
- you were ever disciplined unfairly, arbitrarily or inappropriately by an adult and could not challenge it because you were a young person
- you ever felt your physical safety threatened or violated at school
- you were ever the object of a degrading comment or put down or made to feel ashamed or humiliated by a teacher or by another young person
- you ever made a degrading comment or put down a fellow student or other young person  
u ever made a degrading comment or put down a fellow student or other young person
- you were ever yelled at, commented upon, whistled at, touched, or harassed in a public place
- you ever yelled at, commented upon, whistled at, touched or harassed another person in a public place
- you ever heard degrading jokes, comments, or put-downs about women, people of color, Jews, people with disabilities, or lesbians and gays made in your presence
- you were ever the object of slurs, comments, put-downs, or violence due to prejudice
- you ever made degrading jokes, comments, or put-downs about women, people of color, Jews, people with disabilities, or lesbians or gays  
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- you ever ignored or downplayed someone else's discomfort, embarrassment, lack of safety, or fear of being attacked, or belittled someone for being uncomfortable or scared
- you were ever in a situation in which you felt conspicuous, uncomfortable, or alone because you were the only representative of your racial or ethnic group, gender, or sexual orientation
- you were ever ignored, served last, or watched suspiciously in a store because you were a young person
- you have ever received less than full respect, attention, or response from a doctor, police officer, court official, or other professional because of your age, race, gender, sexual orientation, or physical ability
- you have ever been hit by an adult or a peer
- you were ever forced to fight or otherwise defend yourself against another young person
- you ever drank, took other drugs, overate, underate, or did something dangerous or unsafe in order to cover your feelings or hide the pain

At close of exercise, facilitator breaks participants into pairs to discuss what came up for them, and then conducts group discussion on same question.

## **We Have Failed Them**

This exercise predictably brings up many experiences and many feelings for young people; when we use it with adult groups, the same responses occur. Clearly adultism is part of the daily experience of all young people. In reality, we have failed them. We discriminate against teens, keep them unemployed, vulnerable to abuse, exposed to violence and drugs and uninformed about health and reproductive issues. Then we blame them if they get strung out on drugs. We blame them if they get pregnant or get someone else pregnant. We blame them if they drop out of school, or get picked up for hanging out.

Beyond their powerlessness in an adult-defined world, then, actual abuse keeps teens from succeeding. Current national estimates are that one out of four girls and one out of six boys is sexually abused. The rates of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect toward young people are alarming; violence against children—which can range from throwing an object to using a weapon—occurs in 62% of American families every year. Past experiences of personal violence drastically limit a young person's ability to succeed in the future by fostering self-doubt, mistrust, withdrawal, and self-destructive behavior.



Teens also correctly perceive that if they are a person of color, a woman, gay or lesbian, disabled, or from a poorer family, their opportunities to achieve are severely limited. For example, girls face lower expectations and sexual harassment. Black and Latino males face higher rates of institutional discipline, suspensions and arrests. Gay and lesbian teens have to deal with physical and verbal attacks and intimidation. Teens learn to blame themselves for this abuse as well.

When we only help them develop higher self-esteem we lie to teens. We lead them to believe that they are the problem and they are to blame. We mislead them into thinking that personal virtue, effort, perseverance and skill can completely change their lives. The reality is that many will fail. Their chances of surviving and succeeding are increased when they know what they are up against. Then they can work together, with us as allies, to change the odds.

## **Alliance: What Do Young People Need From Us?**

### Be an Ally

Teens need to see us as strong, reliable and completely on their side, knowing that we trust them, respect them, and will tell them the truth.

### Tell the Truth About Power

Teens need us to tell them about how power is used and abused in this society—to be informed, clear, and firm about how racism, sexism, adultism, and the other "isms" work. We must be ready to share that information openly and in clear, direct language that does not fault them for lacking information.

### Tell the Truth About Violence

We also must help them identify the social violence directed at them because they are women, people of color, gay and lesbian, and/or poor, and young. Confirming this reality for them can help them to begin to take power to stop the violence.

### Support Healing

We need to let them know that it is not their fault that they were demeaned, assaulted, or discriminated against, and that it happens to many of us. We need to pass on skills to them for avoiding further violence in their lives.

### Interrupt Adultism



It is always appropriate to intervene supportively where young people's rights or due respect are being denied by adults.

### Interrupt Internalized Adultism

It is always appropriate to intervene (supportively) against putdowns or devaluations one teen does to another, or a young person does to her/himself.

### Promote True History

Young people need information about their struggles and achievements as young people so they can take pride in and build upon them. This directs them to think of themselves as a community responsible for one another's well being.

### Be a Partner

Teens need us to be willing to share the power and work with them.

### Make Mistakes Openly

Adults, of course, are never supposed to make mistakes. This can mean we never take the chance to reach that young person who is hardest to get to. Go ahead. Try anyway. And when you make a mistake, it's OK; just fix it, and try again.

### Don't Do It Alone

Take other adults with you, and train them to support you when your own issues come up, when you feel you've made a mistake, and so forth. The flip side of the mistreatment of teens is the isolation of adults. Getting support from other adults will help decrease the possibility of taking out your hurt on young people or trying to enlist support from them when they shouldn't have to be in a position to give it.

### Trust Them to Be Powerful

It is about to be their world; they are strong, and have convictions and experience about what is right and what is wrong. Support and expect them to make their own decisions. Nothing will change until they do.

### Celebrate Their Successes

Every day each teen makes dozens of choices to value their own thinking, relationships, preferences, desires, etc. Every teen finds ways to communicate that the oppression is hurting them, and every teen finds ways to express love even to those adults passing on



the oppression. Every teen finds ways to get attention. These are all victories. They also often have to choose between limited options, and those choices are the exercise of will to minimize the oppression. They deserve adult allies who notice and point out these acts of self-determination, and celebrate them.

We can be strong and powerful adult allies to the young people we know if we can shift our emphasis from raising their self-esteem to increasing their power. That, in turn, will allow the exuberance, insight, and creativity of young people to contribute to bettering all our lives.

### **Adults as Allies of Teens**

The following general directives apply to adults who work with teens. To be able to use them, adults must be able to support each other and get help from each other when this work gets hard. So directive number one is: we as adults back each other up and take time with each other. After that Teenagers Need Adults To:

Listen.

Model strength, openness, respect, trust, and cooperation.

Encourage and support the same in teens.

Provide information.

Respect the intelligence of everyone at all times.

Value teens' fears and problems as genuine.

Help each person identify personal issues and solutions.

Provide a clear understandable conceptual framework to aid in personal problem solving.

Provide lots of options and encourage creation of new options.

Do not try to force change on anyone.

Prevent trashing—adult to teen, teen to adult, and teen to teen.

Disavow rudeness, judging (especially judgements about appearance), lecturing, attitudes of disrespect, or the attitude that one is "incorrect" or blameworthy for what she/he believes at the



present time.

Recognize that small steps and activities are important and need to be encouraged.

Acknowledge that people are doing the best they can given the information they possess and the thinking they have been allowed to do.

Do not rescue young people. And at the same time be prepared with resources should they be needed and requested.

Facilitate teens' self-consciousness as a group: foster their chances to share information with one another, respect one another, and experience their power as a group.

Refer the group back to its own resources.

Emphasize local community information, services and networks.

Bring out the common features of teens' experience of hurt, resistance to hurt, and power.

Facilitate the breaking down of family and group insularity that prevent community intervention in abusive situations.

Talk from the heart.

And, more generally:

Understand the systematic mistreatment of young people in an adult-defined world, and contradict that mistreatment.

Welcome and celebrate making mistakes and be willing to risk and learn.

Support teens being 100% powerful.

In the face of all of the above, and with all of our concerns about violence and abuse, nonetheless LIGHTEN UP.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to [paul@paulkivel.com](mailto:paul@paulkivel.com). Further resources are available at [www.paulkivel.com](http://www.paulkivel.com).

