

## **Adult Support for Young People** *By Adam Fletcher*



There is a lot of tension in the world today focused on young people. In generations past, the passive, ambiguous purpose of children and youth was to receive whatever adults doled out to them. Unfortunately, that's out of step with modern times.

Today, there is a convergence between technological advancements and changing social norms throughout our society. That convergence is going to result in massively transformed institutions, including the economy, education, government, and healthcare. On the outset, this transformation looks like a 24/7 connected culture and increased demand for governmental transparency. Nobody can say exactly what the outcomes will look like, but without deliberation and intention, we may see democracy fade while corporatism steams ahead.

A logical outcome of increased social connectivity is towards mass social engagement; a progressive avenue for governmental transparency is radical democracy. In order to ensure either of those has a clear shot in the future, we must engage in the tension in the world today focused on young people.

After twenty years of working in communities across North America focused on engaging children, youth, and adults together in critical social change work, I have come to understand that all three parties are essential for successful action. However, the role of adults in ensuring successful youth engagement cannot be emphasized enough.

It is ridiculous to call all adults the enemies of young people—but no more ridiculous than calling all adults the allies of children and youth. We need a new way to show what roles adults have in supporting, or not supporting, young people.

### **A Spectrum of Support**

There are many different ways adults can express their support for children and youth. Working with adults and young people, I identified six categories of support adults can demonstrate for children and youth.



Following are descriptions of each of these categories.

**Over-Permissive Adults** assume young people have too much ability. Assuming young people need as much freedom as possible, they aspire to always think “the best” of children and youth and want to be their friends. However, this is a disingenuous understanding because it ignores or denies the realities of present-day society. A right-thinking adult would never give a completely inexperienced person the keys to a car and expect them to teach themselves how to drive, because this is seen as a dangerous and irresponsible gesture that can lead to death. This type of relationship can be thought of as empowerment, despite actually making some young people *less able* to exercise power. Without the necessary skills and knowledge, giving children and youth unbridled opportunities actually limits their potentials for success. Over-permissiveness may take the form of teachers giving students open learning activities without a purpose; youth workers allowing young people to operate programs without rules; and parents making children stay at home without adult supervision of any kind.

**Well-Meaning Adults** are determined to help kids. They are often identified as progressive teachers, social workers, counselors, and forward-thinking parents. Well-meaning adults routinely presume the abilities of all young people are on par with all adults; however, no matter what age a person is, all people do not have the same abilities or capacities. Well-meaning adults inadvertently deny young people their personal needs, wants, and desires by over-estimating them. The problem inherent in their position is that well-meaning adults undermine their own best intentions by denying their ability to truly be of use to children and youth.

**Responsible Adults** require adults to become able to respond appropriately to the demands of society, particularly regarding their relationships with young people. This type of relationship is often focused on lateral interactions that provide camaraderie as well as guidance. Rather than being teachers, adults are facilitators; instead of being rulers, they are guides. Responsible adults respond to the practical environments, situations, and cultures where

they interact with young people. This might mean educating young people, engaging their wisdom, and saying “no” when it is appropriate. It always means being an ally and partner with young people. This may be the most realistic and responsive relationship adults can have with children and youth.

**Over-Controlling Adults** act from a negative perception or misconception of young peoples’ freedoms. These adults seek to control children and youth because they believe that without their rules, restrictions, and punishments, young people would run wild in the streets. Often taking the guise of concern for young people, over-controlling adults distrust or misunderstand young people. This type of relationship can lead to children and youth feeling like infants that are incapable or subhuman. Over-controlling behaviors include locked doors, coded language, and/or choices made for children and youth that ignore that young person’s well-being.

**Indifferent adults** simply don’t see young people. Through their indifference to children and youth, these adults display a kind of social amnesia, conveniently forgetting their own experiences as young people. That incapacitates their empathy for the realities young people face every moment of every day all throughout our society. Indifferent adults minimize discrimination against children and youth, calling it normal and even denying that it happens. They refuse to talk about issues affecting young people, refuse to see it for what it is, and do nothing to recognize it exists. When children and youth are raised in the media, they flip past the article; when young people in their own lives make themselves known, they don’t care. Apathy towards children and youth is at an all-time high, and these adults exemplify why.

**Hostile Adults** don't like young people. They are genuinely and overtly determined to maintain over-controlling relationships with children and youth. Their attitudes and behaviors are assertively anti-child and anti-youth, and

routinely strive to make young people feel inhumane, no matter what their age. They believe adult will is the only will, and must be thrust upon young people. These people frequently use abusive manipulation to domineer over young people, and rely on straight-forward hostility to enforce their way of being. Unfortunately, hostile adults occupy all stations throughout society. A growing number of parents are hostile adults. So are other people who are supposed to directly serve children and youth, including teachers, childcare workers, youth workers, store clerks, librarians, and others. Indirectly or directly responsible for upholding the well-being of young people, hostile adults also occupy the ranks of police officers, politicians, school principals, mental health counselors, and family doctors. So many of these individuals interact with young people every single day that it is no wonder how youth discrimination is relayed from generation to generation.

### **Conclusion**

This continuum is not meant to imply that there is one way to see all young people at all times. Circumstances beyond their control often justify the support adults have for young people. However, many adults simply refuse to take responsibility for how they see children and youth. Assumptions about many circumstances are either misguided or ill-informed.



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