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Presents...



Adulthood Kills: The Effects of Discrimination Against Children and Youth on Nonprofits

By Adam Fletcher

As a consultant, I work with organizations that serve children and youth across the United States. I am regularly called in by local and national nonprofits, government agencies, foundations, and others to help figure out why their programs for young people are failing. Like an emergency room doctor, I'm called in after the wound has been inflicted in order to stop something from dying.

Why Child and Youth-Serving Programs Are Started

Before identifying why programs for young people fail, it is important to understand why organizations start child- and youth-serving programs.

Usually, a well-meaning executive director or community leader identifies a need they believe they can fill by helping young people directly. Their reasons often include that it feels good to them to start programs, offers opportunities for new funding, or fulfills their organizational mission. It also helps grow organizations as they attempt to meet community needs more fully and directly.

Once the program is started, organizations set out to hire the best staff. Adults who work with young people are hired for many reasons. When they're hired for the right reasons, they have a heart for young people, confidence, a desire to do the right thing, and are committed, sincere, flexible, and responsive.



Why Child- and Youth-Serving Programs Seem to Fail

After these steps are filled, a program does things to survive. There are a few essential components programs for young people have to have in place in order to exist. Many say that when these are missing, child- and youth-serving programs fail.

- *Funding*—Foundation grants, government funding, and individual donations are meager or non-existent.
- *Promotion*—Outreach to the community and young people specifically doesn't really happen.
- *Communication*—Once young people are in the program, there's no regular dialogue with them, parents, and other relevant people.
- *Trained staff*—Adults who work with young people aren't taught how to sustain and grow the program in healthy ways.
- *Commitment*—While everyone was on board in the beginning, few people stayed around when they were really needed.

When asked, many adults who work with young people will add to this list. Depending on circumstances, they'll identify lack of support from org leadership; no genuine need in the community for the program that was created; lack of partnership among other programs serving young people; under-resourced; no written program plan or curriculum; no sustainability planning; underestimated program costs; poor or no strategic planning; no record keeping; no leadership transparency in the org; little adaptability in programs; mission drift; poor reporting; and many other reasons that are typical of failed programs of all types serving all kinds of people. I'm not going to keep listing these, because the U.S. government has [a guide](#) that covers all of them. There are also several guides from other organizations, and even [an eHow article](#) on how to do it right!

A few other folks go deeper when they're looking for the challenges that sink their programs for young people. They uncover phenomenon like empty optimism or a "values vacuum", where people have little actual depth in what they're doing. They find competition is promoted while innovation is smothered, while organizations act like their alone trying to solve every problem in the world. All these are among the deep reasons why the things listed above happen.

I am not saying these analyses are wrong, but honestly, if everyone knows why programs serving children and youth fail, why do so many still fold today?



Why Programs for Children and Youth ACTUALLY Fail

At the core of all failed child- and youth-serving programs is something so deep that its rarely seen, and so widespread that it doesn't appear on almost anyone's radar. The adults who serve youth directly in these programs, the org leaders behind these programs, and the funders supporting these programs are like fish that keep running into a glass wall but don't know that they live in a fishbowl.

Those walls are made of something called adultism. Adultism, which I define as bias towards adults, is everywhere throughout our society. It is deep in our language, engrained in our culture, and infused in our institutions. Many people have focused on those components, as a simple google search will show. However, we rarely expose how deeply it affects everyone, including the people who are trying to serve young people in beneficial ways.

Adultism is imbedded in the policies, procedures, operations and culture of organizations. It reinforces individual bias towards adults and is reinforced by those biases in turn. The term is typically used when discussing the treatment of children and youth by adults. Adultism can be expressed through low expectations for young people or the failure of young people to advance our communities. There are no laws against adultism, and it is all around our society. Once you're aware of it, adultism is obvious in our language, activities, policies, evaluations, attitudes, and ideas.

There are many ways adultism causes programs to fail.

1. *Adultism Threatens Children and Youth—AND Adults, Too.*

Since adultism is the bias towards adults, young people face it constantly in the organizations and programs that are intended to serve them. Depending on its expression, young people who face adultism in words and treatment may feel physically threatened because adults are always in positions to emotionally, physically, and psychologically harm them.

Even if no harm is imminent, adults routinely use forceful and threatening enough words and gestures to create a feeling of fear and resentment. This kind of environment is not engaging, is not enlivening, and cannot truly teach anything positive to young people of any age. Youth programs cannot maintain any level of "success" in the presence of these imminent threats towards the very people they're supposedly serving. The ecology of the child or youth hasn't been improved or enriched; instead, it has been held constant. Young people living in constant fear will ensure the failure of any program and organization eventually.

2. *Adultism Affects the Culture of Organizations.*

Every nonprofit, government agency, and community group that wants to serve young people needs teamwork and cooperation to get things done. The use of adultist language and the culture of adultism spread throughout this work is a demoralizing force. When adultist language condescends a young person in a program, all children and youth in that program can feel devalued and not part

of the team. That demoralization will in turn lessen their response to programs, the output of the program, and young peoples' commitment to the program, it's mission, and the vision behind it.

In my years of work, interviews with thousands of young people and adults, and observations as an international consultant, I have seen adultism create environments where young people unconsciously fear that their genuine feelings, words, actions, and ideas will confirm the stereotypes against them that are believed by adults. This fear can cause young people to either act like adults in order to gain their approval, or act in other non-age appropriate ways. As a consequence, all young people suffer from having too-high expectations thrust upon them, or too-low responsibilities.

3. *Adultism Affects the Ways People Feel.*

Adultism lowers the expectations, abilities, and outcomes of organizations. Young people may be found doing more whispering than working, acting hostile toward each other and towards adults, and shunning or refusing to interact with other young people or adults. The reasons could be unfair treatment, favoritism, or a lack of acknowledgement from adults. These actions cause youth programs to fail constantly and leave children and youth feeling insecure, unappreciated and anxiety ridden. Adultism is not just offensive to young people themselves, but to all others in youth-serving organizations.

When adultism runs rampant in the vision, mission, goals, activities, and outcomes of an organization, "success" itself is determined solely on adult terms, offering little or no checks and balances for bias towards adults. Because of all of this, adults lose their credibility, trustability, and connectedness with children and youth. When adults are not respected, some engaged youth and highly motivated children, regardless of their age, will leave. As a result, youth-serving organizations will lose young people from their programs, outcomes from their activities, funding from their supporters, and goodwill from the larger community. This is what truly causes youth programs to fail.



How Programs for Young People Can Succeed

Undoing adultism should always begin on a personal level. However, in order to truly commit to making sure programs succeed, organizations have to commit to change. Some steps that can be taken include:

- *Training*—Providing organization-wide training on adultism, discrimination against youth, ephebiphobia, and adultcentrism.
- *Confronting*—Committing to ending and confronting adultism throughout the organization structure and culture, in policies, activities, language, and outcomes.
- *Eliminating*—Not creating barriers to the full and equitable involvement of young people in services and activities.
- *Infusing*—Make deliberate space for the full and equitable involvement of young people in all decision-making processes at all levels of the organization.
- *Educating*—Support the hiring, retention and professional growth of young people throughout the organization.
- *Sustaining*—Prioritize staff training and communications to ensure that they understand the impacts of adultism and that the organization delivers all services in a competent manner.

There is a lot to learn about adultism. You can find my in-depth thinking about adultism on [my own blog](#), [Paul Kivel](#), [John Bell](#), and Theresa Graham are among the adult authors who've written substantial articles about the topic. You can also join the facebook group called "[I Fight Adultism!](#)" for all kinds of conversation about the topic.

About the Author—Adam Fletcher is the founder of The Freechild Project, and an internationally recognized leader in the youth movement. For more than 20 years he has worked locally and internationally, teaching young people and adults how to change the world through youth/adult partnerships. He has written more than 20 publications, 200 articles, and thousands of blog entries related to youth, society, and social change. Adam is available to come to your community or organization and train people on adultism, youth/adult partnerships, youth voice, ephebiphobia, and much more. Learn about him services at adamfletcher.net.

About The Freechild Project—The mission of The Freechild Project is to advocate, inform, and celebrate social change led by and with young people around the world, especially those who have been historically denied the right to participate. We do this by facilitating training and workshops, and through our website. Learn more about us by visiting freechild.org.

Suggested Citation: Fletcher, A. (2013) "Adultism Kills: The Effects of Discrimination Against Children and Youth on Nonprofits". Olympia, WA: The Freechild Project. Retrieved from freechild.org on July 9, 2013.