

# **Ending Discrimination Against Young People**

by Adam Fletcher

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# Summary

Adam Fletcher has worked with young people and their adult allies since he was a teenager. Speaking and training thousands of youth and adults in schools and organizations across the United States since then, Fletcher has gained a reputation for provocative, empowering approaches to transforming the roles of young people throughout society. In August 2013, the internationally-recognized expert in youth engagement released *ENDING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST YOUNG PEOPLE*, a book-length summary of what he says is the most important issue facing all young people everywhere today.

*ENDING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST YOUNG PEOPLE* is an unusual social analysis that veers far from the boilerplate by combining meaningful insight with practical steps anyone can take to change the situation. In it, Fletcher recounts several powerful stories of discrimination he has seen along with penetrating practices in families, schools, and even organizations intending to help children and youth today. He also discusses in great detail virtually every major social issue facing young people today, offering his opinion and possible strategies meeting these challenges.

On issues ranging from parenting to commercialization, Fletcher's stance is one that attempts to find a middle ground between radical youth liberation and what he sees as forced social hierarchy. Fletcher calls for compromise between young people and adults, and new approaches to old assumptions that he contends are undermining well-intended work throughout society. His overarching message is that society is becoming

mature enough to re-envision how adults behave towards children and youth, and that its essential to do things differently; however, in order to ensure that opportunities are as effective as they could be for as many people as possible, we have to address negative attitudes and opinions that may be undermining our efforts.

In the introduction to *ENDING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST YOUNG PEOPLE*, Fletcher shares the basis of his analysis. “Any honest conversation about engaging young people must address discrimination against young people,” Fletcher writes. He goes on to explain some of his personal and professional experiences with this discrimination, also called adultism. Suggesting that, “We must transform society to engage all young people, everywhere, all the time,” Fletcher lays out the premise of the book by summarizing the world facing children and youth today.

In the first chapter, Fletcher describes the why discrimination against young people exists. Opening the chapter, he uses a classroom story leading to a youth who says, “They hate us because we’re young.” From there, he details the foundation of discrimination against young people by suggesting its grows from infancy into childhood, young adulthood, parenthood, and old age. He then describes the paternalistic roots of discrimination against young people, which according to Fletcher are rooted in the ways adults perceive them. Describing several of these perceptions, he describes how adults see young people alternatively as products to be made, consumers of adult-driven society, tokens for adults’ self-satisfaction, and as adults-in-

the-making. He also details how race, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and other factors intersect with discrimination against young people.

Fletcher enters into Chapter 2 by demanding we call discrimination against young people what it is, which in a word is *adulthoodism*. After exploring the essence of that term, he expands the readers' understanding of the issue by examining different terms and how they relate to the issue. He then explores different age groupings throughout society, and explains how they're related to understanding adulthoodism. Finally, he recounts the terms by detailing how each of them is apparent through the lives of children and youth today.

In Chapter 3, Fletcher asks what is wrong with discrimination against young people, and proceeds to share many ways. Connecting the phenomenon of adults acting like youth to discrimination, he then expands on many ways adults undermine young people in everyday roles as parents, teachers, youth workers, counselors, and other positions. He shows how adults being over-permissive, well-meaning, over-controlling, indifferent, and hostile towards young people are all similarly disposed to discriminating against young people. Fletcher shows how these practices extend throughout life, and through formal and informal structures, have affected many generations. In order to illustrate systems that affect children and youth, he shows how schools, families, healthcare, the economy, nonprofits, cultural activities, and legal systems all discriminate against young people.

Chapter 4 addresses the causes of discrimination against young people. Both relying on and eschewing theories about human development, Fletcher explores how the differences between young people and adults inherently cause discrimination, as do the differences among children and youth themselves. He then details how obvious discrimination is, especially when young people discriminate against themselves; when adults promote it; when our culture promotes it; and when the structure of society forces it. Fletcher then suggests that not only does every single adult discriminate against young people, he says it's not always bad or wrong. He then says the challenge is to stop rationalizing it and start addressing it directly.

Continuing in his expose, Fletcher uses chapter 5 to detail how discrimination happens throughout society. Showing how adults routinely segregate children and youth from adults, Fletcher suggests this silences young people. He says the real risks facing young people aren't addressed because of this silencing, then shows how different institutions throughout society are framed by discrimination against young people.

Chapter 6 closes the book by suggesting that all children, youth, and adults have a role in ending discrimination against young people. He shows how each person can challenge discrimination by sharing basic techniques. Exploring many of the reasons why discrimination against children and youth must end, he then suggests all actions must begin personally, and then focus on others. He ends the book with calls homes, schools, and nonprofits to the carpet specifically, challenging each with distinct explanations of what they can do.

The end of ENDING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST YOUNG PEOPLE includes a glossary of more than 25 terms, as well as a list of resources Fletcher recommends for readers to continue their self-study.

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