

FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

MODULE 6:

Adultism





PART 1

Reflect

Exercises and ideas to
help you think about your
own beliefs and practices



ACTIVITY

Thank Your Mentor

When you were a young person between the ages of 5 and 18, who was an adult who you considered to be a mentor, or someone who supported your growth in some way?

WRITE A THANK YOU NOTE TO THAT PERSON

Be specific as you write. Acknowledge the specific actions they took, or ways they behaved that helped you to feel they were someone who wanted the best for you.

As you review the letter you wrote, did you notice any practices your mentor used that you try to implement as an adult when you interact with young people? Circle the ones you feel are most important.





Understanding Alternate Caring Behaviors & Adultism

The list of important mentoring practices you brainstormed above most likely includes examples of **Alternate Caring Behaviors**.

Alternate Caring Behaviors are the practices, attitudes, and behaviors that demonstrate adults' support of young people and trust in their ability to grow and succeed.

Many of the young people we engage in our programs, and in our lives, are navigating various forms of oppression that create barriers to their success, barriers such as racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and more.

These forms of oppression can show up in the structures and systems that surround young people, in their interpersonal relationships, and as internalized oppressions.



HOW DOES ADULTISM PLAY A ROLE?

One form of oppression that most young people face is **Adultism**.

The word *adultism* refers to behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement.

When implementing a Youth Development approach, it is essential that we actively work to understand the multiple oppressions that young people may be facing, including Adultism. Alternate Caring Behaviors help us move beyond mere understanding to actively working to heal trauma, provide support, and be in authentic relationships with young people.





ACTIVITY

Adultism Around Us

Think back to your own experiences as a young person, and also to times you have worked with youth, or observed young people in the world. In the spaces below, brainstorm examples of Adultism that you have noticed or experienced in the environments where young people spend the majority of their time:

WORK

What are some ways young people experience Adultism in the places that they work?

SCHOOL

How does Adultism show up in schools?

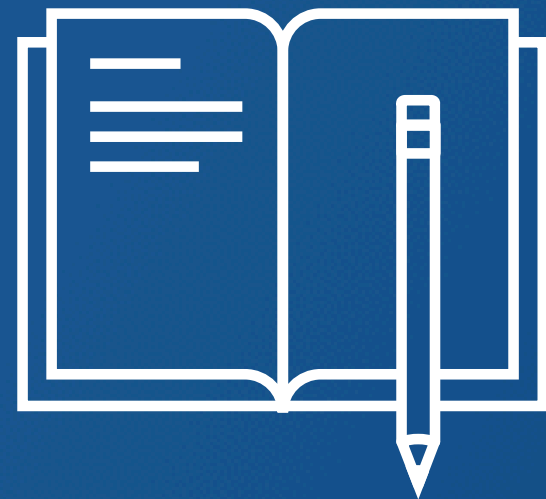
MEDIA

What are some ways young people experience Adultism in the media, including social media?

COMMUNITY

Where have you seen Adultism present in the neighborhoods, community programs, businesses, modes of transportation that young people spend time in?





PART 2

Learn

Definitions and frameworks to
help deepen your understanding



Adultism Definition

In order to understand whether we are engaging in Adultist behavior, Bell suggests that we ask ourselves questions such as:

- “Would I treat an adult this way?”
- “Would I talk to an adult in this tone of voice?”
- “Would I grab this out of an adult’s hand?”
- “Would I make this decision for an adult?”
- “Would I have this expectation for an adult?”
- “Would I limit an adult’s behavior this way?”
- “Would I listen to an adult friend’s problem in this same way?”

Behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement.

— **JOHN BELL**

Bell points out that sometimes the answer may be “no” for good reason, depending on the circumstance. We might hold the hands of young children when they cross the street, but not the hands of teen-agers, for example. But often, there is no clear justification for treating a young person differently than an adult except for habit and attitude. If you can’t justify your decision, it is important to re-examine your reasons for making it.



Framework: Types of Adultism

This list of five common types of Adultism was adapted from the work of Visions, Inc. and Camino & Associates, Inc. These descriptions are relevant to situations when Adultism is present, and can also be used to understand how other types of oppression function.

1. DYSFUNCTIONAL RESCUING

Dysfunctional rescuing means helping young people on the assumption that they cannot help themselves, or helping youth in such a way that limits their ability to help themselves. The result is that young people are ultimately set up to fail. Youth are not given the chance to make important decisions or to take on legitimate responsibilities, under the assumption that they are “just kids” or because it is “too hard to keep them on track.”

2. BLAMING THE VICTIM

Blaming the victim means attributing the behavioral problems of young people solely to the youth themselves, without considering the context of young people’s lives. Young people are dealing with adultism on a daily basis, and many young people have grown up in poverty, in dangerous neighborhoods, in inferior schools, and among adults who don’t care about them. The result is that young people don’t get the adult support that they need. An adult gets frustrated with a young person and says, “I give him all the chances in the world to act responsibly, but still he screws up,” but does not acknowledge that other adults treat that same youth as a “child.”

3. AVOIDANCE OF CONTACT

Avoidance of contact means the lack of regular social or professional contact with young people, and the lack of effort to learn about youth and the environments in which they live. The result is that adults create programs based on their own needs, not on the needs and interests of young people. Adults say that “they just don’t understand youth,” but don’t seek out information on young people and don’t ask youth for their ideas, preferences, or interests.

4. DENIAL OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Denial of cultural differences means the lack of regular social or professional contact with young people, and the lack of effort to learn about youth and the environments in which they live. The result is that adults create programs based on their own needs, not on the needs and interests of young people. Adults say that “they just don’t understand youth,” but don’t seek out information on young people and don’t ask youth for their ideas, preferences or interests.

5. DENIAL OF THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ADULTISM

Denial of the political significance of adultism means a lack of understanding or denial of the social, political, and economic realities of young people. It also involves discounting the fact that young people are often not treated “as equals” and don’t have many of the same rights and privileges as adults. Note: This framework can be used to understand other “-isms” such as racism, classism, homophobia, and sexism.





Intersectionality Definition

Intersectionality is an analytical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege.

When implementing a youth development approach, it is vital that young people feel acknowledged as individuals, and also as members of a group or community. The concept of intersectionality reminds us to recognize the various forms of discrimination and privilege that young people in our program may be experiencing.

Some key examples of these diverse identities include:

- Race
 - Gender
 - Sex
 - Sexual orientation
 - Class
 - Geography
 - Religion
 - Political affiliation
 - Culture
 - Family role
 - Immigration status
 - Ability
 - Body type (height)
 - Mental health
- 

Framework: Alternate “Caring” Behaviors

These guidelines for Alternate “Caring” Behaviors are not exhaustive. We recommend that you brainstorm strategies that are specific to and appropriate for your own situation.

TYPES OF ADULTISM	ALTERNATE BEHAVIORS	SOME GUIDELINES TO ACHIEVE ALTERNATE BEHAVIOR
Dysfunctional Rescuing	Functional Helping	• Resist doing things for young people that they can do for themselves. • Provide clear and constructive feedback that notes positive behaviors as well as areas for improvement. • Engage young people as partners in formulating plans to improve their lives or behaviors.
Blaming the Victim	Taking Responsibility	• Define how your own thoughts and behaviors contribute to a situation, rather than jumping to conclusions about the young person’s behavior. • Do not degrade the concerns or issues of any young person. • Do not assess young people by using the standards of your own group.
Avoiding Contact	Making Contact	• Make an effort to learn about the lives and concerns of young people. • Make an effort to get to know and interact personally with young people. • Make interacting with young people a priority. • Be willing to change your perceptions to fit your new experiences.



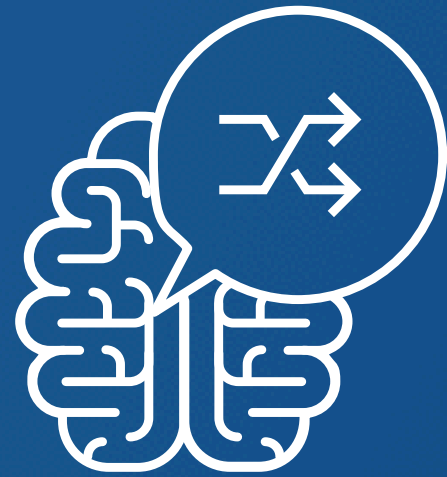
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TYPES OF ADULTISM	ALTERNATE BEHAVIORS	SOME GUIDELINES TO ACHIEVE ALTERNATE BEHAVIOR
Denial of Differences	Recognition and Appreciation of Differences	• Grant equal respect to young people’s cultural beliefs and practices — don’t presume adult ways are automatically better. • Develop an awareness of your own assumptions and verbal and nonverbal communication patterns that may be inappropriate for use with young people. • Do not assess other young people by using the standards of your own group. • Do not assume you understand young people; do not assume young people are like you.
Denial of Political Significance of Oppression	Recognition and Understanding of Political Significance of Oppression	• Seek knowledge about the political, societal, and economic realities of young people — and try to stay aware as it is much easier to fall back into mainstream thinking. • Avoid depending on a sole (or merely a few) source(s) of information. • Develop critical thinking skills. • Recognize that the personal experiences of people constitute a valid source of knowledge.

(Source: Camino & Associates, Inc.)





PART 3

Observe

Spotlight on programs and projects that use a youth development approach



Program Spotlight: My Brother's Keeper Alliance

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER ALLIANCE

One of the alternate caring behaviors to counteract Adultism is “making contact.” By intentionally engaging in genuine relationships with young people, we counteract some of the oppressions of Adultism. Getting to know a young person by volunteering as a mentor or tutor creates an opportunity to learn about their life and their concerns.

In 2014, President Obama launched My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Alliance to address the opportunity gaps facing boys and young men of color. By supporting and empowering mentoring networks across the country, **MBK motivated many adults to heed the call to invest time in the lives of young people.** By making contact with young people and getting to know them, often working across differences, adult mentors exhibit caring behaviors that reduce Adultist tendencies.

“When youth are intentionally centered in the work both the organization and youth benefit from the mutual partnership... youth are experts in the systems within which they are a part of, beneficiaries of, or oppressed by. Youth can speak from the current experience of those impacted by systems and policy.”

— **MBK MENTOR**





Project Spotlight: Loíza Alliance for Peace

LOÍZA ALLIANCE FOR PEACE

The Loíza Alliance for Peace is a My Brother's Keeper National Impact Community Partner. The Alliance for Peace was born out of the idea of supporting youth in Loíza — a Puerto Rican town of roughly 30,000 mostly Afro-descendant people — in the process of strengthening their quality of life and taking racial equity into account as part of the context for reducing local violence.

In the past 2 years, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Alliance harnessed the resources, knowledge, and expertise of their partner organizations that have the community's trust and the unique ability to engage youth to become change agents — all while navigating the challenges of being a town with limited political power in the oldest colony in the world. As a result of their work, violence in Loíza is at an all-time low.

“Out of [our planning] process came the idea of supporting our youth in the process of strengthening their own quality of life and being able to work with racial equity and the experience of racism in Loíza as part of the context of the violence that has happened in the last decade in Loíza.”

— **ALANA FELDMAN SOLER,**
LOÍZA ALLIANCE FOR PEACE



Watch Loíza community leaders in [this video](#) talking about their work in engaging young people as part of their violence prevention initiative.

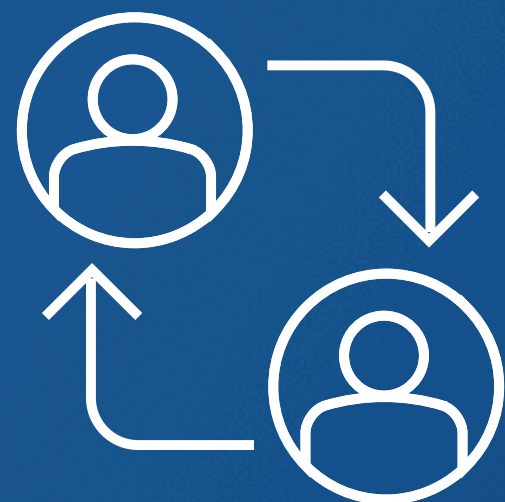


Reflection Questions

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What are some ways that the organizers of the Loíza Alliance for Peace had to push against their own internalized Adultism as they planned their response to violence in their community?
- What are some Caring Behaviors you saw from the adult leaders at Nuestra Escuela, a Loíza Alliance for Peace partner?





PART 4

Engage

Reflection and planning tools to move towards implementation

Reflection Tool: Adultism in Your Program

You have already reflected above on how Adultism shows up at work, at home, in schools, and in community spaces. In the space below, think through how common the different types of Adultism are in your own organization, program, or coalition:

TYPE	DESCRIPTION	HOW COMMON IS THIS TYPE (check one)	NOTES & EXAMPLES
Dysfunctional Rescuing	Helping young people on the assumption that they cannot help themselves, or helping youth in such a way that limits their ability to help themselves.	☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	
Blaming the Victim	Attributing the behavioral problems of young people solely to the youth themselves, without considering the context of young people’s lives.	☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	
Avoiding Contact	The lack of regular social or professional contact with young people and the lack of effort to learn about youth and the environments in which they live.	☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	



Reflection Tool: Adultism in Your Program

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TYPE	DESCRIPTION	HOW COMMON IS THIS TYPE (check one)	NOTES & EXAMPLES
Denial of Cultural Differences	Motivated by egalitarian ideals, in this case it involves “age-blind” approaches. The result is that youth are forced to adapt to the norms of adult culture because it is the “right culture,” and their own cultural practices are seen as inferior or incorrect.	☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	
Denial of the Political Significance of Adultism	A lack of understanding or denial of the social, political, and economic realities of young people. It also involves discounting the fact that young people are often not treated “as equals” and don’t have many of the same rights and privileges as adults.	☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	



Planning Tool: Implementing Caring Behaviors

From the list above, choose one of the ways that Adultism shows up most often, or most egregiously in your work. Review the list of Caring Behaviors. What are some Caring Behaviors you (and other people who hold power in your organization) can implement to push back against Adultism and create safe, and celebratory spaces for youth participants? Make your notes below:

ASK YOURSELF:

- What are examples of Adultism in my program?
- Caring Behaviors we will implement in response:





PART 5

Research

Resources to further
your learning



Resources

John Bell, “Understanding Adultism”

<http://lovingjustwise.com/adultism.htm>

The Wallace Foundation, “Youth Perspectives on Designing Equitable Out-of-School-Time Programs”

<https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/youth-perspectives-on-designing-equitable-out-of-school-time-programs.pdf>

Creative Youth Development National Partnership, “Adultism and its Impact on Youth and Adult Spaces”

<https://www.creativeyouthdevelopment.org/2021/05/25/adultism-and-its-impact-on-youth-and-adult-spaces/>

Katherine King, Psychology Today, “The Problem with Adultism”

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/lifespan-perspectives/202109/the-problem-adultism>



Thank You!

