

A Future Without Adulthood

Adam F. C. Fletcher

Abstract

Conceptualizing the absence of adulthood is an important step forward for young people, advocates and researchers. This paper shares a hypothetical future absent of discrimination against youth and bias towards adults. The author proposes that in the place of adulthood is sustained democracy, freedom and justice for all, regardless of age and many other biases, as well.

Introduction

What would a future without adulthood look like? Perhaps young people could provide the best visions for this possibility. However, as a systemic cultural, social, economic and political reality that varyingly affects everyone, this phenomenon can and should be examined by all members of society of any age. This paper is not about predictions. Instead, it examines signals throughout our society, looks back to see forward, and uncovers patterns to proceed (Gorbis 2019). While oppressive suffering happens everywhere because of adulthood, this paper is intended to show that a better world is possible.

Adam F. C. Fletcher is a consultant, speaker and writer focused on engaging everyone, everywhere, all of the time. The author of thirteen books including Facing Adulthood (2015), he has had more than 100 articles published and is the co-founder of the Freechild Institute for Youth Engagement and the director of SoundOut.org. He is a co-editor of this special Spring 2024 issue on Adulthood. Email addresses: adam@commonaction.org

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Understanding the Need for a Future

The term “adulthood” has been variously employed since at least the 1840s, when it was used to describe traits of an animal that matured faster than expected (Wright, 1849, 241). One of the first print usages of the word applied to humankind came in the 1890s, when it was a rationale for excluding women from the vote (Bryce, 1896, 633). Since then, adulthood has bridged a series of definitions and understandings. Early applications applied to appearances and behaviors of children that appeared adultlike. Starting fifty years ago, the overarching analysis focused on discrimination against youth as embodied by Flasher (1978) and Bell (n.d.). In the past two decades, emergent literature has examined the presence and applications of adulthood throughout systems affecting young people (Eubanks et al., 2010; LeFrançois, 2013; Fletcher, 2015a). It has been addressed as an institutional, cultural, and personal phenomenon (Fletcher, 2015a); with identifications and analyses in a wide-reaching number of fields, including education, architecture, governance, social services, economics and far beyond.

However, as an existential dilemma affecting all people for some period of their lives, adulthood should be addressed differently than most have attempted. Adulthood is an ecological phenomenon that can only be truly understood by grappling with the absolute permeation of its existence throughout the entire realities that face every child, every youth and every adult around the entire world. Anything less than that not only undersells the absolutism of adulthood but serves to perpetuate and habituate its presence and profound impacts on everyone in every situation, everywhere, all the time. The present breadth of adulthood can be daunting.

Because of this, it is important to consider the possibilities of a future without adulthood. Some light futurisms could prompt practitioners, researchers, parents and young people themselves to envision this for themselves. According to Sardar (2010), futurism is an attempt to systematically explore predictions and possibilities about the future and how they can emerge from the present, whether that of human society or life on Earth in general. This paper is an attempt to apply futurism to adulthood. Considering the ubiquity and constraints of the phenomenon, this paper is necessarily over-reaching. However, from this practitioner/advocate’s perspectives emerging from experience, examination, and exploration in hundreds of settings with thousands of young people and adults, this paper could serve as an informed prediction and projection of possibilities throughout our society.

Seeing the Entire Picture

In this paper, I use a holistic perspective of adulthood that looks at entire systems affecting all humans to highlight the individual parts of the lives of young people. This differs from reductionist examinations of adulthood that look only at specific relationships within the lives of children and youth. Generally, these examinations focus on one of two components, specific interpersonal roles and

specific physical locations. The interpersonal roles that have been examined include parenting (Brett, 2011; Pensoneau-Conway, 2017), teaching (Fletcher, 2015b), babysitters (Nagasawa et al., 2023), mental and physical healthcare providers (Bettencourt, 2020; Augsberger, et al., 2023), lawyers and judges, elected officials, police, and more. The specific locations for adultism that have been identified range from playgrounds to classrooms, dinner tables to living rooms, hospitals to playgrounds, and even in our court system, legislatures and elsewhere throughout society.

While those perspectives offer important viewpoints, they do not successfully encapsulate the extent to which the lives of all people are undermined by adultism. Understanding that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, a holistic perspective of adultism can encourage readers to understand the entirety of its sociological impacts. This ecological view must encapsulate the psychological, social, political, emotional, educational and cultural elements of children and youth, as well as their economic, judicial, and religious backgrounds (Lopez, 2021). It must also include the positive and negative experiences, adversity and trauma, and the helpfulness and hopefulness of young people.

With that massive breadth firmly established, we can move beyond any attempt to gaze into a crystal ball and identify what adultism portends and what we are seeing actualized throughout society right now.

A Glimpse of Youth

In the future, society will recognize that the constructed signals of being young, both biological and sociological, were inherently biased against people who were not seen as adults. Acknowledging that the designation of being young imposed a hierarchical relationship between caregivers and the cared for, this organizing system afflicted children, youth and adults from the arrival of newborns through to the deathbed of elders.

These foreseeable possibilities may show us a young person sitting by a glen looking over a small stream trickling past their feet. Moving from being a naturalist's daydream to being a daily reality for countless young people worldwide, this is an idealized image meant to hold possibilities for the future without adultism. Gone are the struggles for daily existence that marked the daily lives of more than half the world's young population for centuries. Instead, patient calmness and de-stressed lifestyles have replaced the tensions of poverty, destitution, discrimination and near-cessless suffering. This glimpse of youth is packed with bias; however, it's near-perfect idealism that is intended to allude to the potential for every child and every youth everywhere, to live in a future without adultism.

Although a potential byproduct, the absolute independence or equality of young people is not the goal of this anti-adultist transformation. Rather, the goal is to assert the full humanity of children and youth where each is seen as themselves

and as part of the larger whole of their families, communities, nations and world. This is the interdependence so desperately needed in modern confines, rather than the extreme independence that is ill-begotten by hyper-commercialized forces focused on their accumulation of power at the expense of humanity's well-being.

The damage of excluding and excommunicating people from civic life because of their ages is shown to be wholly detrimental, making democracy a hollow, futile gesture of personal power in the face of corporate and imperialist powers (Fletcher & McDermott, 2023). The absolute determination of young people and their adult allies to stay engaged despite those challenges is made plain in a future without adulthood, whereupon the dire necessity of engaging all children and youth in the civic, economic, educational, social and cultural lives of their communities and countries, as well as throughout our entire world, is made obvious through the benefits to everyone, everywhere, all the time. Alluding to the power of collectivism, the end of adulthood necessarily reinforces the need to invest in young people's democratic well-being. Beyond typical civic engagement, an anti-adultist future will reinforce the roles of young people throughout society (Kurth-Schai, 1988). Engaging all children and youth as full-enfranchised voters, a future without adulthood necessitates young people being acknowledged and empowered producers and makers, consumers and civic actors, leaders and drivers throughout society. Moving collectively towards a powerful democratic future, enfranchising all children and youth with the vote, empowering them as full community members and equitably engaging them throughout society could help overcome the democracy deficit disorder so replete throughout society today.

In this future, common expectations for all young people revolve around complete equity throughout every station of society. Focused on the innate tendency towards fairness within all children, a future without adulthood necessitates the centrality of justice throughout society. Already keenly aware of what they want to receive in relationships of all kinds, in the future children grow up embedded in cultures of justice that embrace their senses of balance, trust and security that infuses harmony throughout the world. Simply put, equity becomes the balance young people feel in relationships with adults in all roles, as measured by them. Parents, teachers, counselors, police, service providers, business operators, politicians and countless others take on this challenge. Absent the overwhelming prejudice of adulthood, together young people and adults will not only be able to observe inequities but will be empowered to take action to correct situations where adulthood emerges. The binary aspects of popular culture, government systems, judicial structures, educational processes and economic models will all be challenged. This means that racial strife, gender bias, socio-economic discrimination, neurodiversity and other inequalities, along with many other negative markers of aspirational industrialized nations will melt away through learning, advocacy and collective action, all of which end in a future without adulthood. Ignorance among the masses is replaced with unity, connectivity and trust-building. This transformation will be

marked by the emergence of a new popular anti-adultist consciousness, one that treats all people as allies, not despite their ages but because of their ages.

Launching Towards Transformation

A future without adultism means the rights of every child are recognized as tantamount to the rights of all humankind, and because of that safety and well-being are prioritized higher than any other status on Earth, including economic control, military might, and political willfulness. Food, water, shelter safety and the necessities of life are delivered wholesale, expanded and elaborated on, and ensured for all people, everywhere, regardless of age or station in life. Adultism ends because basic needs are met.

For the past fifty years, the work of advocates, educators, and researchers focused on identifying the age segregationist practices, behaviors, attitudes, and policies that imposed discrimination against people because of the years they had been alive. Studies have examined the systemic laws, pervasive cultures, and personal attitudes and beliefs of the entire population that enabled adultism. This revealed the continuous oppression of people not viewed as adults simply because they were young. Intersections with racism, homophobia, classism, intellectual biases and more are shown to exacerbate adultism, making oppression a cross-identity, non-binary classification that affects some more than others. This results in a stream of trans-disciplinary approaches to inform policymaking at the global, national, state and local levels around the world. In the future, a symbiosis of progressive social change and academic study focused on ending adultism will provide paramount thought leadership in many areas, and in turn, influencers, politicians, pop culture figures and others will come to a consensus that discrimination against all young people everywhere must end. Rather than singularly relying on policymaking as a kludge for transformation though, thousands of entities and billions of people worldwide will assume responsibility for the cause of teaching, advocating and acting against adultism.

Young people themselves will be the most successful forces for social change. Faced with the persistent call to action, children and youth will use technology, interpersonal relationships, formal and informal avenues to develop a transnational, multilinguistic, culturally astute and socially progressive movement of peers and allies to release the oppressive chains of isolation, segregation, alienation and stagnation that faced them. Adultism will be clearly acknowledged as the oppressive force at the root of each of these struggles, and this will result in a massive global movement for change.

In the future, families will be immediately enlightened by this new understanding. Around the world, parents will become conscientious and concerned about the oppressive behavior and beliefs facing the young within their homes and nearby. Grandparents, foster families and all sorts of primary caregivers joined

together with extended families and concerned neighbors to address various trauma-informed beliefs, assumptions, customs, laws and ideas that bound adulthood as an organizing construct throughout society. Rather than perpetuate the generational myths that continually tied together society in an oppressive mesh of power and control, these family units dismantled the historic concepts of children-as-powerless, children-as-property, and “children-as-adult-in-the-making” (Kohn, 1993). They were replaced with new acknowledgment of children-as-full-humans and children-as-self-actualizers. Long present but persistently denied, these acknowledgments became *de rigueur* in every part of society, including popular media, psychology, legal entities, economics, education, governments, families, architecture, and far beyond.

At the same time these family shifts occurred, young people were mainstreamed into governmental and civil functions throughout society. This included elected officials and government workers confronting policies, procedures, processes and personnel that imposed, supported and sustained adulthood throughout the systems of governance. Upending the social order that necessitated gerontocracy, eliminated popular sovereignty and challenged the health of democracy, governments worldwide individually and collectively transformed almost every threat against young people by ensuring their access to public goods and services in every circumstance regardless of their age. This immediately ensured access to healthcare, food security, shelter, clothing, and education for each child and youth as they were so inclined. It realigned each formal system of care to ensure child-led and youth-led processes at every level, from the individual to city, state to national, as well as the transnational and global levels. Programs were designed by young people working equitably with adults in every government-ensured setting, including hospitals, jails, social services, parks and recreation, and more. Never veering from dismantling adulthood, new common practices were adopted and adapted in every nation according to their cultural and social priorities. Practices known to undermine the lives of children and youth were canceled. Chattel treatment, sex trafficking, child soldiers, extreme poverty, war, social stratification and more were all confronted directly and dismantled accordingly. In this future without adulthood, any activity seriously endangering children and youth, including physical, mental, or emotional health, is immediately stopped. Suffrage for all regardless of age, guaranteed incomes, taxation according to wealth, economic liberation, elimination of political office age restrictions, and other strategies to stop segregation according to age and the adult abuses of young people.

Special attention to addressing adulthood was taken throughout education systems at all levels, including primary, secondary and higher education (Fletcher, 2015b). A certain shared understanding swept the world, and suddenly and without a doubt all educators and educational leaders understood that nearly all formal educative processes around the world were based on imposition and made compulsory because of adulthood. Focused on force and coercion instead of curiosity,

inquisitiveness and desire, in a future without adultism educators come to understand that their biases constantly and continuously undermine their best intentions. In this future, grade-based classroom curriculum, carrot-and-stick behavior management, age-based segregation in schools, the isolation of learning topics, bias towards teaching styles and against learning differentiation, tiered approaches to advancement, testing and assessments, and many other typical tools used in the past were either completely relegated to the dustbin of history, or reimaged for new applications. In the course of a generation, adultism in education was almost entirely deconstructed and reconstituted to form the basis of a new self-engaged approach to teaching and learning focused on ability rather than age. This way relied on each child coming to understand themselves as their own learning motivator, and educators acting as guides and facilitators rather than as lawyers, judge and jury for every student, all the time. Places once relegated as age-determinant schools became open spaces for exploration, examination and enlightenment designed to meet the unique needs, proclivities and purpose of each learner. They became ageless, sometimes solitary and sometimes in groups, always safe and never demeaning. In most communities, this was a wholly new vision for schools.

Within mere years of beginning this campaign nearly every minor and major child-serving and youth-serving organization around the world signed on. This included the 250 million young members of the “Big 6 Youth Organizations,” including the Young Men’s Christian Association, YMCA; World Young Women’s Christian Association, YWCA; World Organization of the Scout Movement; World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, IFRC; and The Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award. It also engaged local organizations serving dozens and hundreds in their communities; individual social entrepreneurs working to engage young people and adults in their homes and neighborhoods; and many others. These entities became lightning rods for addressing adultism in its myriad forms. Along with realigning their own activities to ensure the absence of discrimination against young people, they became deliberate intercessors, mediators and activists demanding massive, wide-scale shifts throughout society. They taught parents, they engaged policymakers, they challenged the unwilling, and they instigated the intransigent. Most importantly though, they taught and actively engaged young people and adults from all stations in life in these new ways, spreading the ideology of anti-adultism while proving the effectiveness of age equity and the impetuous outcomes of past crimes against the young committed simply because of their age.

The mental health implications of this transformation were most pronounced. The overarching adultist order faced the power of righteous indignation against by people of all ages, requiring ways to channel that energy toward healthy expressions. The aggrieved perspectives of the young as well as older people became the basis of many positive, powerful social changes. Counseling and treatment options were infused throughout society and made available to everyone free of

charge. At the same time, pharmaceutical-free practices became the rule of the day for treating the multiple challenges that emerged among those addressing adulthood within themselves, that they had perpetuated, and that they were facing daily. Bridging inequities present around the world, mental health care became a prioritized possibility for all people regardless of age, with developmentally appropriate care and education provided to all people.

Positions of Possibility

In the future in each of these locations, children and youth of all ages have assumed, been granted, and otherwise amassed vast abilities to engage throughout the world. Rather than passively accept whatever adults hand to them, each young person has become actively powerful and moves with intentionality and potentiality throughout their days. Using a constructivist approach, starting from the youngest ages each child discovers, is taught and is reinforced to understand the concept of Self. Their self-image, self-esteem and ideal self are bound together by practices reinforcing interdependence with the larger world. Increasing awareness of this larger world embraces their individual contributions, positioning each child and every youth as an important, contributing and ultimately essential member of society. These positions of possibility represent the grandest potential for each young person, effectively serving to elevate and uplift society.

By dismantling adulthood throughout their spheres of influence, each young person effectively gained the capacities to be able to research, plan, facilitate, evaluate, make decisions and advocate for what mattered most to them and their communities. As they became deliberative problem-solvers, essential mediators, critical thinkers and much more, the ripple effects spread beyond their homes, throughout their schools, across their communities and around the world. Most importantly though, the outcomes start within each individual child as they increase their awareness, skills, knowledge and abilities to excite, motivate, engage, participate, involve, and empower others. Starting in batches, their successes in these ways extend to classmates and peers, siblings and cousins and far beyond, permeating the highest reaches of adulthood throughout the nations. Parents and mental health providers, childcare workers and police officers, soldiers and presidents all become committed to the possibilities of living in a world without adulthood. Extinguishing the inferno of oppression, they envision the end of intersectional divisions and biases and the elimination of the terroristic exploitation of power, and working together with young people as partners, embrace this future without adulthood wholeheartedly. Within a short period, world leaders, megacorporations and even authoritarian dictators dedicated their power and authority to restorative justice, reconciliation and democratic collaboration as well as global community-building, all because of this future.

Within these possibilities it is revealed that adulthood is not only unfair to chil-

dren and youth; it is unjust *towards* adults, too. Adults with too much power, authority, control or responsibility can feel guilt or shame, or overburdened by their station in life. While appearing as the tyranny of plenty, adultism manifests itself in the lives of adults. In turn, adults perpetuate adultism when they are motivated by the reward of power and the punishments of its absence. This creates the normative expectation that all adults exercise their authority and control over young people, standardizing the experience of adultism in any environment where people who are not recognized as adults are present. The unrealistic reality implicit within this is that all adults aspire to be dominant, in turn nurturing artificial barriers between the young and those who are older. These barriers encourage internalized adultism, which relies on adultcentrism and primacy while infantilizing young people with explicit and implicit signaling about their apparent inferiority. The psychological effects of adultism encourage a sense of subjugation, necessitating the authority, rules, punishments and judgment of adults to reign supreme over the young. All of this requires consent, or at least dismantles resistance, among adults who have positions of control in society. The burden of adultism is simply too much for many adults, with countless numbers extracting themselves from interactions with young people, further perpetuating age segregation and isolation. In a future without adultism, the cynical and ultimately nihilistic beliefs that drive this concentration on domination will be overcome.

Conclusion

The future is still wide open. Allowing for the continued reality of adultism facing countless generations remains an option. Intransigence, resignation or otherwise standing idle is a choice, too. The ugly realities faced by children, youth and adults because of the impacts of adultism remain present and amplified by the web of oppression present throughout our society.

Ultimately though, the most powerful step any of us can take individually is to transform the ways we see and treat children and youth every single day. Through mental health counseling and regular care, we can heal the trauma within us that perpetuates our worst adultist tendencies and nurture new neuropathways that relieve the anxiety embedded within much adultism. If every one of us did this, we could change our own attitudes and behaviors and start witnessing young people emerge triumphantly in wholly equitable intergenerational relationships, and adultism could practically end (Lesko and Webb 2023).

New cultural norms can emerge within a generation, and in a lifetime powerful, positive change can happen. More importantly, we can continue to influence, educate, motivate and advocate succeeding generations of children, youth and adults as they change the world we share. As the future here describes, there is no greater action we can take.

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