

Working With Young People as Adult Allies

Paul Kivel

Abstract

In this piece, Kivel provides a necessary introduction to the concept of adultism and proposes practical steps for adults, including educators, youth workers and others, to take action to address adultism by becoming allies.

Introduction

As adults (and youth) who work with and support young people, we can use some help and direction in how to do this work well. We are part of a group that, both in fact and in young people's perception, sometimes has discriminated against and abused power over youth. It may also be hard for us to think clearly about young people, because we were once young and perhaps retain our own unresolved conflicts from those earlier years. After all, adults sometimes exercised power abusively over us when we were young.

Abuse and violence have intimately touched all young people. If we define abuse as restricting, putting down, controlling, humiliating, or hurting another, it is clear that abuse is a daily experience for most young people. We have a word for this system of abuse: adultism.

Obvious examples of adultism are all around us: physical and sexual abuse, extreme forms of "discipline," fights, the corporal "toughening up" process for boys, and the instillation of fear in girls. The still-pervasive teaching of male and female roles—that women are dependent victims, men are abusive and people

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who are queer or trans are unnatural—is a disaster for young people. But beyond this, emotional, verbal, financial, sexual, social, and political forms of abuse exist. Perhaps the most pervasive form of this abuse is our educational process itself, carried on in schools, families, religious and cultural institutions, and the public media. This process, despite the best intentions of some teachers and administrators, continually invalidates or trivializes young people’s intelligence, denies them access to important information (for example, about birth control), and then faults them for not having it. The process arbitrarily subjects them to either control or dependence and denies them life resources—safety, money, transportation, and the chance to speak for and represent themselves. Perhaps most crucially, it continually passes on adults’ resignation to the fact that what people can do and what the world will allow have limits—in other words, we teach them our own hopelessness.

In young people we find powerful resistance to such teachings and, at the same time, internalization of them. Youth fight the roles and inhabit them, and in that confusion they abuse one another and themselves.

How can we be allies of young people in these circumstances? The first step is to affirm that we are indeed allies. We care, and we are in a great position to support youth. We all have memories of an adult or two who was there for us, and we all have some immediate information about what we can do for youth in our lives. But more basically, many young people have become accustomed to mistreatment by adults. We can contradict that learning by becoming an adult who cares and is willing to do something to express that care. We can do a lot more.

The following suggestions are meant for those of us who work with youth in youth-centered settings. In general, this work occurs within adult-constructed institutions, such as schools, detention centers, residential programs, and recreational and cultural programs, that contribute to the power inequality between adults and youth and that represent that inequality to many young people. Awareness of the power dynamics in these settings as well as the barriers already set in place by the adult abuse of youth outside these institutions is a prerequisite to being an effective ally. This also means being aware of the existence of other power differences (such as racial and class inequities) that may separate us from the young people we work with. However, “being aware” does not mean “being paralyzed by” or “being helpless about”! It means considering where our own confusion about these differences lies, recognizing where confusion and misinformation may exist for young people, and being prepared to talk honestly about these issues.

As adults, the best thing we can do with youth, right from the start, is to contradict directly, in our actions, the traditional adult behaviors youth often encounter.

For example, where youth are traditionally denied information, we provide it, answering all questions and not faulting the asker for lacking the facts. No question is trivial. Similarly, young people and children hear in hundreds of ways that they are stupid or not smart enough. In contrast, we start with the assumption that they are smart and are doing everything they can to live creative and non-abusive

lives. We assume that the only deterrents to their success are institutional barriers and the abuses that have happened to them.

Youth often have incorrect information or misinformation about, for example, the ways boys and girls should act, or behave, or about each gender's "natural" or biological qualities. This confusion exists in addition to the misinformation that adults have passed on to them about race, class, gender identity and sexual identity. We do not necessarily blame young people for believing these things, because it makes sense for them to believe stereotypes about African Americans, Jews, or people with disabilities when an entire culture teaches and reinforces these images. We can only explore such seemingly inherent beliefs by allowing them to surface, keeping the discussion open, and letting young people work out the issues with each other.

This work is in part about making information—and thereby power—accessible. It is also about acknowledging feelings stemming from the abuse people have already experienced. To carry on our work we must make what we say simple and direct, structured around a few basic goals. We must be clear and use real-life language. In particular, we can avoid the jargon we have all learned to use that distances us from what we are trying to convey. Such words as "perpetrator," "instigate," "continuum," and even "violence" can be walls to real experience. Even the words adults use to categorize young people—"youth," "teen," and "adolescent,"—can serve to pigeonhole young people, holding them at a distance. This work is also about how we as adults can learn from young people. In thinking about the traditional roles of young people, we begin to think about the traditional roles of adults.

Roles emerge that we are supposed to have mastered—knowing how much work is appropriate; making our way in a world alive with violence and unequal power distribution; feeling we have to know everything; and assuming responsibility for the support, maintenance, safety, and physical and mental health, twenty-four hours a day, of young people as well as ourselves. We notice how we have all learned what consequences can follow from making mistakes. We think about the lies we have ingested from counselors, educators, and child-care experts that result in the feelings all adults experience: "I've been trying so hard and this isn't easy, so I must not be good enough." By sharing power with young people, we can let down the adult "guard" we've learned and experience a refreshing relief from these oppressive roles. By trusting the expertise of young people, by finding out what they think and what their lives are like, we lighten this load of adult responsibility. Giving up the role of omniscient teacher with all the answers gives us a chance to learn ourselves.

Adults in cultures across the world often have turned to young people for inspiration. The younger generations' hope that the world can be different, their outright insistence on justice and fair treatment (sometimes mislabeled "rebelliousness"), their insight, and their irreverence are essential to our own freedom. Acknowledging this fact to ourselves is a crucial step forward in our work with young people.

Adults do not routinely show respect to youth or treat them as having equal rights. Here again we can turn the situation around by being personal and direct, speaking informally for ourselves and from our own experiences with honesty, respect, and humor.

Beyond adultism's stipulated roles, young people carry misinformation about themselves that is always appropriate for us to correct. A boy who has learned that men are, on a basic level, monsters needs interaction with adults who clearly believe that men have learned violence but are not naturally abusive. This boy will also benefit from being exposed to adults who support the many ways men resist abuse—crying when they are hurt, walking away from fights, seeking nontraditional careers, and fighting for the rights of women, people who are LGBTQ+, and children. A girl who has learned that women survive based upon how they look and how they relate to men needs an adult ally who supports her efforts to move beyond these limiting social expectations.

Another part of the disaster of adultism is the teaching of other oppressions to young people, especially those of race, class, and gender and sexual identity. Here, too, our supportive corrections are crucial (and, of course, not easy to make). A racist or homophobic remark or abusive act that goes unchallenged hurts everyone, including the perpetrator. It lowers the youthful community's hopes that these oppressions can be overcome and eliminated from the world. It passes on, directly, the abuse that keeps youth separated from each other in the first place.

Young people do form a community; they have learned together, and they have collectively experienced control by adults. Calling upon them to resist abuse as a community is a genuine act of alliance. It means supporting them by recognizing their collective strengths and the ways they have resisted abuse. Further, it means expecting them to be powerful and to handle their problems by reaching out to each other, with our help and confidence backing them up.

Finally, we do this work for ourselves and to keep alive our own hopes for a non-abusive world. We do this work not "for" young people but "with" them, knowing that we are engaged in our collective liberation.

We should not hunt for or expect gratitude from young people. We can just enjoy being with them, teaching and learning together. We can get support for our work by finding other adults to talk with, especially when hopelessness, exhaustion, or our own unresolved teen issues creep back into our lives. We must support each other, make loads of mistakes, fix them, and continue with our work.

Facilitating Social Justice with Young People

One of the tasks of the educational system is to prepare young people to live and prosper in the world. In a school system, this task is undertaken in large part by daily instruction of groups of students roughly the same age. One thing common to all students, regardless of likenesses or differences, is their participation in

this learning community. How this community is structured and facilitated, how students are positioned to relate to each other, what and how they are taught — these are all lessons, whether explicit or hidden, about how they are to live with and act toward each other and others in the world. How people live together, after all, reflects how they define and practice justice and is itself a part of what constitutes justice.

The topic of social justice draws attention to students' relationships to each other as well as to the larger world. What are these relationships? How do people "get along" with each other? Does differential treatment exist? Is inequality of resources, opportunity, or access a concern? What differences are represented in, or made invisible in, the classroom? How do students' experiences of the larger world enter the classroom with them and manifest in who speaks most and who is silent? What does the institutional setup do to lessen or heighten these differences?

However "social justice" is to be defined, the term applies to the classroom itself: Young people learn together the factors that separate and unite them as well as how their learning community operates. To teach social justice is to support them in functioning as a cooperative community, becoming visible to and learning from each other and themselves, examining their differences and commonalities. It is a process by which students come to consciousness about who they are, about the unjust institutions of power that they live within, and about how people can come together to build community and to establish justice. In other words, teaching social justice goes beyond the individual or group; students are taught to become conscious of the institutions in our society and how these institutions affect our lives. The purpose of the process is emancipatory, enhancing young people's ability to think critically and to engage in the profoundly multicultural challenges of the twenty-first century with a commitment to social justice.

Some kinds of multicultural education propose that the goal of this education is simply to develop awareness of each other's "cultures," as if in accomplishing this task we would then all have equal places in the playing field and would in fact be "equal." Awareness here is not enough; stating that we are "all the same" would not only be false but disingenuous. Even if the same resources within a classroom could be provided equally to all students, students come to a classroom already separated in their abilities to use those resources. What may ultimately be hardest to face in any classroom is the recognition of stratification—the fact that some students are part of groups that are elevated and others are part of groups that are diminished. In addition, when young people in the United States are compared to young people across the globe, young people in the United States are elevated in privilege and resources far above the majority of youth worldwide. There should be not simply equal access but equal success under a suppler and wider definition of what counts as success. The goal of social justice education is to facilitate students to face and work together across their separations and to engage in critical thinking about the history of those separations in order to become effective allies for justice.

How does facilitation work? Obviously it involves the students, the facilitator, and the process itself.

In the Classroom

The first thing to notice is that students come to the discussion of “social justice” with misinformation or outright falsehoods, experiences of mistreatment or outright hurt, and some expertise in each of the areas you address. The process of taking on the “isms” invariably, at one point or another, touches upon difficult occurrences from students’ lives outside the classroom as well as current separations, visible and not, among youth right in the room. And it also calls upon students’ equally powerful experiences of taking stands against unequal treatment and having others take stands with them.

Moreover, the classroom—and the educational system it represents—is one of the basic institutions of society. Expect to see the disparities of our larger society mirrored in the differential treatment students witness and receive. The disparities and differential treatment are alive in the ways students treat each other, see each other, and see and treat you. They are further mirrored by the relationship of your institution to other institutions serving other youth populations.

At the very least, every student in the educational system at one time or another has had their intelligence questioned or invalidated by an adult, even in the seemingly objective process of grading. Doubts about one’s own thinking count as some of the most profound barriers young people (and we as former young people) have to deal with and are a basic pillar of adultism, the mistreatment of young people. Often the doubts are instilled or enhanced right in the classroom. At the same time, the educational system can be and historically has been an arena of emancipation in which students can learn, together and across differences, to recognize inequality and to organize against it—actual democracy in action. To this emancipation, you can add the great strengths and ingenuity students have adopted to survive mistreatment, their curiosity about and interest in each other, and the ideals of fair play and equity in young people’s cultures.

Your Place as Facilitator

To prepare for facilitation first requires taking some time to think through your own experiences of injustice and how they will affect the discussions about to come up in your classroom. Then, turning to your role as an adult, ask yourself: What does an adult, acting as an ally, do to support young people? Discussions about hurt, separation, conflict, and privilege—and resilience, resistance, and alliance—among young people can become very personal; it is essential for you to examine ahead of time how particular issues might affect you or even get in your way.

As a successful adult survivor of childhood conditioning, you are modeling how adults successfully take on and address the “isms.” The assumptions we make

about young people apply to you as well. Like them, you came into the world curious, intelligent, and vulnerable. Like them, you have negotiated your way through mistreatment, misinformation or no information, resistance, and alliance. And now you are an adult, with a specific relationship to young people as an adult ally.

A Model of Power

Notice that many or most “scars” mentioned in this exercise come to us systematically, based upon our membership within various groups—the categories of race, gender, sexual identity, economic status, and the rest under which we live. That is to say, we inhabit a social structure in which people become categorized and separated into groups that are allowed either more or fewer social resources, such as wealth, housing, sustenance, education, civil rights, leisure, or political representation. The allotment of social resources is based upon existing inequalities—differences in power. Some groups are targeted for institutionalized degradation, exploitation, and violence: They are targets of oppression. What happens to people who are targeted?

- ◆ They experience oppression—exploitation and violence in routine, day-to-day, institutionalized, and systematic ways. One form of oppression is the continual dissemination of misinformation or outright lies about the targeted people’s character, making them and their concerns invisible or discredited in larger society.
- ◆ One harsh effect of oppression is internalized oppression—the targeted people come to believe in the lies or misinformation about themselves or other members of their group.
- ◆ The contradiction to oppression and internalized oppression lies in the fact that people in target groups have always put up resistance—fighting back against both.

The corresponding groups on the other side of each issue are not targeted; they are nontarget groups. What happens to people who are nontargets?

- ◆ Nontarget people receive the same misinformation or lies about target groups that members of target groups receive about themselves. Often this misinformation comes from people the nontarget child or young person trusts—parents, siblings, friends at school, and teachers—in a process called conditioning. Sometimes conditioning also includes misinformation or hurtful expectations about the experience of being a nontarget (for example, training a boy to “act like a man” even though that training includes shutting down feelings and enduring physical mistreatment). Experiencing conditioning is not the same as experiencing oppression, but it is also hurtful and scarring.
- ◆ The understanding that nontarget people receive unearned benefits in society simply by being members of that group is difficult for them to face. For people with wealth and power particularly, these benefits amount to privilege. What can make this condition especially hard to recognize is that benefits may be invisible to or taken for granted by the people who have them, even if they are not invisible

to the targeted people who lack them. What can make this recognition even more difficult is that the concept of privileges, perhaps from race or gender, doesn't resonate with a lot of people who lack privilege elsewhere in their lives, such as those who are poor or working-class.

◆ Finally, it is also true that some people in nontarget groups have found ways, however local and limited, to act as allies to people in target groups, assisting them in intervening against oppression and internalized oppression—for example, by using their privilege or benefits on behalf of target groups or to make room for leadership from members of target groups.

Take a few moments to think about groups to which you belong or with whom you are identified. You will probably notice that you have experiences in both targeted and nontargeted groups. To effectively work with young people—to be an ally to them—we must do our own personal work to address the ways we have internalized and/or acted out roles based on our identities and social positioning. This work opens the door to our becoming powerful and useful allies to the young people around us.

Your Role as an Ally: Your Freedom Is My Freedom

We employ the word ally, for the most part, to represent the person from a nontarget, “upside” group who takes a stand against the mistreatment of the target group. More generally, it can mean people in target groups who stand up for each other within the group or stand up for members of other target groups. This kind of alliance is called solidarity, and it has a powerful, longstanding, and inspiring history from political movements across the world. An ally challenges the operation of a system of oppression by interrupting mistreatment or internalized mistreatment—not by rescuing, taking care of, or taking over from, but by standing shoulder to shoulder with. You can probably picture people who acted as your allies when you were young, and you may have your own experiences of acting as an ally to targeted people. As an adult, you are now capable of being an ally to young people.

In the work of building justice, you are inviting young people to acknowledge and to make a commitment to each other across lines that separate them. In particular, you are asking for their commitment to be allies—to see violence or discrimination against target groups that are not their own as injuries to themselves. In seeing someone else's freedom as their own, they can pledge to join together as allies against the mistreatment. What does this commitment mean for you?

Consider your role as an ally to young people (or as an ally to people in other targeted groups):

What does an ally do?

1. Take action. Before everything else, the mark of an ally is taking action, however small or large, against inequality or mistreatment.
2. Listen/learn. A gift of alliance is finding out, from the target-group experience, how someone whose life is different from yours perceives and experiences the world, providing information that has been withheld from you by the conditioning you received. A first act of alliance is to make space for young people, with unconditioned support from you, to define the issues with which they grapple and the structure of the “ism” from their own experience. A companion act of alliance is to research and to discover in detail how the relevant “ism” works by uncovering statistics, facts, and history you can pass on to others.
3. Use your privilege. As an ally, identify the resources you have and use your resources on behalf of the target group, gaining them access and opportunity.
4. Support young people’s leadership. True alliance means getting out of the way of target-group members, supporting them in taking charge of their lives and making their own decisions about what must be done. To rescue or to take over removes their power once again. Conversely, to step out of the way without offering support, resources, or tactful guidance if requested is to abandon the group.
5. Challenge and mobilize other adults. Target-group members, engaged in their own work, need you to intervene with and to educate other members of your group. Moreover, your intervention must come from the standpoint of support, not differentiating yourself as better than them. To the extent you reject or push them away, you are pushing away part of yourself.
6. Take a chance, and make mistakes. Expect to make mistakes and commit to fixing them when you do. Alliance work is built upon trying things, making mistakes, and moving forward.
7. Take care of yourself. Alliance is a lifelong activity. It can’t be sustained unless you are rested, replenished, and hopeful. So in light of that:
8. Get support. Rally friends, family, colleagues, people you can trust, and like-minded members of the groups to which you belong. Talk with them about the challenges you experience, the areas where you get stuck, and your success stories. Discuss strategies for social justice education and how to establish ongoing networks of support. Alliance works best when you are not alone but rather are a member of a community of people dedicated to being allies.

Today, across the country, young people and their allies are fighting to reverse decades of slashed education budgets; resisting attacks on people who are trans; fighting for reproductive justice; spearheading movements for immigration reform; protesting the ongoing U.S. wars on terror; working for racial justice; and joining worldwide networks of people their age to confront global warming. Every one of these efforts is an emphatic refusal to accept hopelessness in the face

of seemingly intractable social ills, institutional oppression and adult irresponsibility. In every effort young people are making commitments to have each other's back. They are not waiting for us/adults to get involved.

At the same time, many other young people, beset by violence and attendant hopelessness, have also not waited on us, turning to gangs, interpersonal violence, criminal activity, substance abuse, or suicide to deal with their pain and anger.

Young people need us with them, adding our resistance and alliance to theirs as the principal tools of collective liberation. The best strategy is solidarity, combining the powers of genuine resistance and genuine alliance. Solidarity among young people and with adult allies. For us to hold up solidarity as a real possibility for young people is only to catch up with what many of them already believe in, hope for, and practice as best they can. To hold it up powerfully is to squarely face the war, exploitation, and violence that threaten it across the world. The dignity, love, and sense of power with purpose that come with solidarity, with having each other's back, is also, of course, solidarity's great joy and our only way towards an inhabitable world where all of us can thrive.

Note

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