

Youth Oppression and Elder Oppression

QUADRANT 1

INFORMATION ON INTERNALIZED YOUTH OPPRESSION

Adultist views of young people as naturally targeted are internalized by people of all ages. The Youth Leadership Institute describes several such internalized attitudes toward young people as objects, as recipients, and as isolates (Youth Leadership Institute, 2002).

- **Young People as Objects**—Adults are in control; they “know what’s best” for young people. Young people are “just kids” and are “told what to do.” Young people’s ideas and input are dismissed or discounted. Young people can internalize this attitude and believe they have no real right to be taken seriously. For example: *A college readiness program in an inner-city school found that African-American young people were not coming to the program. The adults met to figure out why and what they could do about it. No one thought to ask the young people or engage them in the discussion/problem solving.*
- **Young People as Recipients**—Adults are in firm control but willing to “allow” some freedom, letting young people make some decisions because “it’s good for them.” Young people are patronized and viewed as problems to be solved by adult intervention. Young people can internalize these assumptions, believing that they are not particularly responsible or able and always need adults in order to succeed. For example: *Administrators at a group home for foster young people sometimes ask young people for input but rarely follow their suggestions or ask for input on insignificant issues, like what they want for dinner or how to decorate the common space.*
- **Young People as Isolates**—Young people are seen “as equal to adults for their perspectives, ideas” (Youth Leadership Institute, 2002, p. A-11) and relied upon to complete adult-like tasks, but adults fail to recognize their need for support or provide support to build their skills. For example: *Young people take on adult roles in families where the parent is incapacitated in some way; or they are asked to become part of an adult organization and are expected to participate fully, but they are given no training in how to make meaningful organizational decisions.*

Here are some examples of how young people and adults might internalize the messages of youth oppression:

Internalized Subordination by Young People

- Learned helplessness, “adults know best”
- Dependence
- Difficulty making decisions, not trusting own judgment
- Cycle of powerlessness
- Inability to trust own thinking

Internalized Domination by Adults

- Patronizing behaviors toward young people
 - Little or no legal rights accorded to young people by adults
 - Adults do not allow young people to make decisions about their lives
 - Adults believe and act as if they know best
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Summarize a discussion about internalized oppression by asking the participants to share beliefs or attitudes they had or hold about young people and about elders that might justify the subordination of young people and elders.

It can be challenging to separate acts of oppression from appropriate actions taken by adults to protect young people and elders. Review the discussion of this issue in the introduction to Chapter 10, and use suggestions in the conceptual frameworks chapters of this volume for assessing behaviors to determine if they are oppressive to young people or elders.

References

Bell, J. (2000). *Understanding adultism: A key to developing positive youth-adult relationships*. Retrieved on June 20, 2006, from <http://freechild.org/bell.htm>

Youth Leadership Institute (2002). *Young active citizens curriculum*. Available from the Youth Leadership Institute, www.yli.org, or 246 First St., Suite 400, San Francisco, CA 94105.