



It's time ... to talk about it! Your voice. Our future. Prevent sexual violence.

Strategies for becoming an adult ally

Adults' attitudes and assumptions about young people can sometimes get in the way of effective communication about healthy sexuality and collaboration for sexual violence prevention. Stereotypes about youth might discourage adults from taking young people seriously and valuing their experiences, ideas, feelings, skills, and contributions as leaders and agents of social change.

Overcoming adultism¹ is an important part of building youth-adult partnerships for sexual violence prevention. 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" (Bell, 1995, p. 1). Like racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, adultism is expressed through individual attitudes and actions, as well as social norms, traditions, and institutions. The oppression of young people is widely accepted, largely because adults internalized this message when they were young and received similar treatment. Because everyone has been young, everyone has been a target of adultism. However, the ways young people experience adultism are influenced by their social environment and their race, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, class, and other identities (Bell, 1995). Adults can work to eliminate adultism while still providing young people with guidance, structure, mentoring, support, and safety. It is important for adult allies to be responsive to young people's developmental needs, and to do so in ways that promote their strengths, confidence, and power.

Strategies to follow

- **Listen.** Actively listen when young people share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Ask questions. Recognize their experiences as valid and valuable sources of knowledge. Validate their ideas and feelings. Keeping an open mind can help us become better listeners.
- **Learn.** Make an active effort to learn about youth culture and the social, political, and economic realities and concerns of young people, as defined by young people themselves. Show your interest, and find opportunities to get involved in ways that respect youth ownership and leadership on the issues.
- **Appreciate young people's assets.** Recognize the strengths and abilities, worldviews, issues of concern, communication styles, etc., of youth, and do not expect them to be the same as yours.
- **Practice and promote respect.** Be mindful of your tone and treatment toward young people. Be respectful, nonjudgmental, and encouraging. Expect and encourage young people to treat each other the same way.

¹ The term ageism is often used to describe all oppression based on age, and in some cases refers specifically to the oppression of people in later life, Adultism refers specifically to the oppression of young people.



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- **Be honest.** Young people need adult allies who they can count on to tell the truth and provide accurate, developmentally-appropriate information.
- **Treat young people as equals.** Make sure young people have opportunities to shape and guide programs in meaningful ways by including them as equal participants in decision-making processes at all levels of the organization. Resist the impulse to take over, or to do things for young people that they can do themselves.

While fostering equality among young people and adults is vital, adults have ethical and legal responsibilities regarding young people's safety and mandated reporting of child abuse. Adults need to consider and communicate clearly with young people about these responsibilities.

- **Evaluate policies and procedures.** Identify and address barriers to young people's full and equal participation as partners and leaders in preventing sexual violence. For example (Klindera & Menderweld, 2001):
 - Are important meetings scheduled during school hours?
 - When meetings/activities occur during meal times, are participants' meals provided or reimbursed?
 - Are meetings/activities held at accessible locations for participants who do not drive?
 - Are youth volunteers/staff provided with the same resources (e.g., work space, email address, internet access, etc.) as adult volunteers/staff?
- **Provide resources.** Young people need information, training, and other resources to succeed in leadership roles and participate as equals in youth-adult partnerships. The resource

Best Practices for Engaging Youth as Partners in Sexual Violence Prevention explores approaches to effectively engage youth.

- **Allow room to grow.** Developing leadership skills and becoming an adult ally are an ongoing learning process. It is important for young people and adults to be willing to take risks, learn from successes and missteps, and continue to build their own knowledge and skills along the way.
- **Interrupt adultism.** Speak up when you encounter attitudes or actions that reflect adultism. Help other adults identify and change adultist attitudes and behaviors. Help youth identify and challenge adultist messages they might have been taught to believe about themselves and other young people.
- **Find other allies.** Get support from other adults engaged in this work.

Additional resources

Kivel, P. (2006). *Adultism*. Retrieved from <http://www.paulkivel.com/resources/articles/23-article/83-adultism>.

Tate, T. F., & Copas, R. L. (2003). Insist or enlist?: Adultism versus climates of excellence. *Reclaiming children and youth, 12(1)*, 40-45. Retrieved from http://reclaimingjournal.com/sites/default/files/journal-article-pdfs/12_1_Tate_Copas.pdf.

References

Bell, J. (1995). Understanding adultism: A major obstacle to developing positive youth-adult relationships. Retrieved from YouthBuild USA: https://youthbuild.org/sites/youthbuild.org/files/kb_item/2011/11/792/UnderstandingAdultism.pdf

Klindera, K., & Menderweld, J. (2001). *Youth involvement in prevention programming*. Retrieved from Advocates for Youth: <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/involvement.pdf>