

Unit On ADULTISM

Unit Outline

Session #

1. Introduction

Introducing the concept of unequal treatment for youth and adults, the session explores stereotypes and putdowns of young people and analyzes two scenes of youth/adult interaction.

2. Adulthood

This session focuses on adulthood and internalized adulthood: how young people are mistreated or discriminated against in adult-defined institutions and how young people can internalize mistreatment against themselves and other youth. Session closes with strengths of young people.

3. Adults

This session examines the conditioning process of becoming an adult, identifying the costs and privileges of adulthood and the requirements for being an adult ally to youth.

4. Organizing/Action

SESSION 1. Introduction

Aims

- To introduce the unit on adultism
- To identify and discuss two day-to-day conflicts between youth and adults

Skills

Students will:

- Identify negative stereotypes applied to young people as a group
- Identify target and nontarget group members in two conflicts affecting youth and adults
- Apply the concept of unequal treatment of youth and adults to other youth/adult relationships besides those depicted

Preparation

Consult with appropriate school counseling personnel ahead of time about the unit, lining up adults for young people to talk to. Make sure you have reviewed local guidelines for mandated reporting of child abuse, and prepare a simple, clear statement to make to students. You will need photos and 2 pieces of butcher paper and markers for the adult/youth brainstorm. Note that there is one photo with uncaptioned and captioned versions: prepare the discussion accordingly.

Session Description

Introducing the concept of unequal treatment for youth and adults, the session explores stereotypes and putdowns of young people and analyzes two scenes of youth/adult interaction.

Session Outline

1. To Begin	10 minutes
2. Top 10	15 minutes
3. Photographs	25 minutes
4. Conclusion	5 minutes

Agenda

1. To Begin

10 minutes

Introduce the unit: these sessions look at what it is like to be young people today in a world defined, for the most part, by adults. What are the strengths of being a young person now? What does it mean to “grow up” from childhood to adulthood? How are young people as a group treated, mistreated or discriminated against? How might young people start to be separated from each other? And how have young people resisted mistreatment, and adults acted as allies to young people?

Post agreements and have students review them.

If you have not done so already, add the following exception to the agreement of confidentiality, in accord with local guidelines on mandated reporting of abuse to young people under age 18:

- There is one exception to confidentiality: if a person says she/he is being hurt, or is hurting her/himself, or might hurt someone else, adults here will be getting outside support to help that person.

Returning to the full list of agreements, ask students to imagine that these were agreements they had with adults around them throughout their lives. Then ask them to visualize a personal experience of having an adult violate one of the agreements, e.g. confidentiality, listening, respect, the right to pass, or others. Ask students to report, without telling what they visualized, how it felt to have that agreement violated. Invite them to recommit to the agreements.

2. Top 10

15 minutes

a. Top 10

Draw a heart on the board, reminding students of the heart exercise—how young people come into the world with certain qualities, and how in the process of being raised they experience limitations (“scars”) and also learn to resist limitations. Point out that in this process there is already a divide between adults and young people—many or most of the “scars” come from things adults say or do, intentionally or not intentionally, to young people.

Have them think, for a few moments, of the “top 10” things that adults say to children or young people that limit or put down young people in any way—even if adults say “it’s for your own good.” When they’re ready, have them call out the words, phrases or statements. Have two students volunteer to take turns writing students’ responses on the board, directly across the heart. Invite all responses, including humorous ones, to allow for laughter.

Post two pieces of butcher paper on the board, one on either side of the “heart.” Make each a column to the right and left of the heart, one labeled “adult” and one labeled “youth.” Ask students, examining the top 10 messages, to point out 4 or 5 different values or qualities these messages suggest about young people and about adults in which young people are devalued or made to be less than, and adults are made to be more-than. Point out that of course there are plenty of positive values that are ascribed to young people, and that you will be talking about these later, but for now you want to focus on the negative messages young people hear.

adult

“mature”

knows what’s going on

responsible

works hard

behaves correctly/appropriately

sober

responsible, upstanding

youth

“just a kid”

ignorant

irresponsible

lazy/plays too much

behaves badly/inappropriately

druggie

asocial, “loner,” “troubled,” “gangbanger”

Close by asking what values or qualities the message “Grow up!” is telling young people about themselves. Summarize that these messages hint at ways that adults and young people are separated and valued differently.

b. Pick One

Have students look at the list under “youth.” Invite each student silently to pick one of the negative phrases or statements that, even if she knows this statement is just a stereotype, she sometimes thinks is true about herself. If no phrase fits, ask them to think silently of a putdown of young people that does fit. When students pick their phrases, have them raise their hands.

When all or almost all hands are raised, have students write down the phrases they picked in a notebook or on a piece of paper they can bring to the next session or remember for the next session. Invite them to keep their phrases private, to themselves.

Students will now turn to consider three photos of adults and youth to explore how this difference shows up in adult/youth relationships.

3. Photos

25 minutes

Distribute the photographs in turn (without disclosing the titles), conducting the following discussion. Explain in advance that at the end of each of the first two photo discussions you will conduct a brief dyad to give students a chance to talk about their own experiences.

Incident 20: “Kids These Days”

- What would you guess is the relationship between the young woman and the older people in this scene?
- What differences can you see between the young woman and the adults in this photo?
- Looking back at the “top 10” things written on the board, can you find any statements that might fit this scene?
- Where is this scene happening?
- What’s happening in this scene?
- What feelings might the adult man be having? The adult woman?
- How does the young woman feel about what the adults are saying?
- What would you guess is the “class” or economic background of the three people?
- How might their class be reflected in what the adults are saying to the young woman? (Ans: *you’re a disgrace; you’re making us look bad; this isn’t a proper way for our daughter to appear*)
- How might the young woman be being made to feel about herself?
- How might she be resisting what the adults are saying to her?
- How could an adult from outside this scene act as an ally to her?
- Who is the “target group,” and who is the “nontarget group”?

Close with a dyad: have students pick a partner, sit facing them, and take turns talking, one minute each, to the following topic:

- Think silently of an experience like this that you have had—e.g., an older person from your family or church/temple or school, &c., disapproved of your clothing or behavior or attitude. When you think about it now, what would you want the adult to know?

At the end of the dyad, have students turn to the next photo.

Incident 21: “Only Two Students at a Time”

What’s happening in this scene?

What does the sign on the door say? How many of you have seen this sign before? What does it mean?

What are some obvious differences between the people inside and the people outside the door? (Ans: *the people outside are younger; they have heavy coats on, dressed for the cold; the youth are racially diverse*)

How are adults, overall, relating to young people here?
Do the adults inside notice the younger people outside?
Might the people on the inside be aware in any way of the people outside?
How are the younger people relating to each other?
How do you think the younger people feel?
What would the younger people have to do in order to enter the pizza restaurant while obeying the sign on the door? What would it cost them to do this? Do the adults on the inside have to pay such a cost?
Who is the “target group,” and who is the “nontarget group”?
If you were the best friend of the younger people outside, what would you do to support them?
If you were the younger people outside, what would you want from adults inside if they were going to support you?

Close with a dyad: have students pick new partners and take turns talking, one minute each, to the following topic:

- Think silently of an experience like this that you have had. When you think about it now, what would you want the adults in charge (e.g. store managers, adult customers, &c.) to know?

Close the dyad and turn to the final photo.

Incident 22: “Nobody Cares”

(without captions)

Set the scene: what event is taking place in the room? What is the likely relationship among the four people?

How might the people be relating to each other?

How might the people not be relating to each other?

Look at the food on the table. What kind of food is it? Where is it likely to be from? How much effort was made to prepare it? What might this indicate about the way the four people in the photo relate to each other?

What are the two people in the center of the photo doing?

What are the people on the left and right side of the photo doing?

What might the latter two be saying?

(with captions)

What’s happening in this scene?

What does the young man on the left feel?

What is the relationship between the young man on the right and the young man on the left?

What does it mean that the two people in the center of the photo are not saying anything?

Who is the “target group,” and who is the “nontarget group”?

How are adults, overall, relating to young people here?

How are the younger/older young people relating to each other?

If you were the best friend of the young man on the left, what would you want to say to the young man on the right? To the people in the center?

Close the discussion by having students point out what is common to all photographs about adult/youth relationships. Ask what other scenes they can think of in which adults and youth are in unequal relationships, in different kinds of families and outside of families (e.g. in school, in stores, on the street, &c.). Finish with the question:

- When you think about these scenes altogether, what do you want to say to adults about them?

4. Conclusion

5 minutes

Close by acknowledging that the scenes and the topic you have considered may remind some students of uncomfortable adult/youth relationships in their own or their friends' families (or at a local store). It may or may not necessarily be safe to address these issues with family or friends (or store managers) directly. Remind students that they have the rights of confidentiality and the right to pass. They can participate in the discussion at the level safest for them, and there are adults available to them to talk to individually if they wish to. Invite them to take care of themselves and stay safe; they will be going on, in following sessions, to think about how to be allies to each other and use adult allies.

SESSION 2. Adultism

Aims

- To examine the effects of adultism on young people
- To apply the concepts of oppression and internalized oppression to the analysis of adultism

Skills

Students will:

- Identify immediate effects of adultism
- Identify personal experiences of internalized adultism
- Identify and acknowledge ways they have resisted adultism

Preparation

Post the adult/youth columns from the last session. Review the stand-up ahead of time for its applicability to your class. You may want to prepare a female and male student ahead of time to lead the “stand-up” exercise. You will need the photographs from the last session.

Session Description

This session focuses on adultism and internalized adultism: how young people are mistreated or discriminated against in adult-defined institutions and how young people can internalize mistreatment, against themselves and other youth. Session closes with strengths of young people.

Session Outline

1. To Begin	5 minutes
2. The standup	15 minutes
3. Adultism	15 minutes
4. Speak-Out	10 minutes
5. Conclusion: one strength I have	10 minutes

Agenda

1. To Begin 5 minutes

Review agreements, including the exceptions to confidentiality.

Ask students silently to review their experiences between the time of the last class and today, looking at interrelations between adults and youth. What experiences of unequal treatment, or of ascribing more value to adults than youth, might they have experienced? What experiences of adults being allies to youth?

Explain that in this session you will be looking more closely at “adultism,” the mistreatment of or discrimination against young people by adults: both what young people experience and how they might “internalize” this experience.

2. The standup 15 minutes

The exercise begins with students as much as possible sitting in a circle, or concentric circles, so that students can see each other. Explain that you will be conducting a “stand-up” exercise on adultism and internalized adultism: students’ experiences of disrespect to young people from adults and disrespect young people learn to do to each other. You will call out statements and ask

students to stand if the statement is true of them. (If mobility issues prevent any students from standing, they can otherwise signify, e.g. by raising a hand.)

Alternatively, if you have students with time to rehearse and you have time to coach them, have a female and male student rehearse leading the exercise ahead of time, conducting it by taking turns reading out categories.

Remind students of the agreements: they have the right to pass; and they also have the responsibility to keep confidentiality—if someone stands up for a particular statement, students agree not to talk about that outside the room or with other people.

Explain that the exercise is done in silence, without side conversations. For each statement, ask students to decide for themselves what the statement means, without asking questions about what it means. You will repeat the statement if students couldn't hear it, but you won't take time to explain it. For each statement, read the statement aloud, pause for students to stand, and repeat the following:

- Notice who's standing (pause)
- Notice how you feel (pause)
- Think about what this meant for you (pause)
- Thank you. Please take a seat.

Stand-Up On Adulthood/Internalized Adulthood¹

Statements:

Please stand up (for students with mobility issues, add “or otherwise indicate by raising your hand”) if:

1. You have ever been called a name by an older person or someone your age.
2. Your dress or appearance, body size, height, shape or looks were ever made fun of or criticized by an adult or young person.
3. You ever put down someone else for his or her dress or appearance, body size, height, shape or looks.
4. You have ever been called “stupid” or “retard” or made to feel bad by a teacher or schoolmate.
5. You ever called someone else “stupid” or “retard” or made them feel bad, even if you were just kidding.
6. An adult refused to hold, hug, or show you affection when you wanted them to.
7. You were ever ignored, served last, or watched suspiciously in a store because you were a young person.
8. Your personal privacy was invaded in any way by an adult.
9. You were ever told to stop crying by an adult.
10. You have ever felt your physical safety threatened or violated at school.
11. You were ever teased, yelled at, whistled at, or touched against your will in a public place.

¹ Some categories developed from Creighton with Kivel, *Helping Teens Stop Violence*, Hunter House, 1992.

12. You ever heard degrading jokes, comments, or putdowns about young people who are women, people of color, Jewish people, people with disabilities, or lesbians or gays made in your presence.
13. You ever made degrading jokes, comments, or putdowns about young people who are women, people of color, Jewish people, people with disabilities, or lesbians or gays to other people.
14. You were ever the called names, put down, or hurt because of prejudice.
15. You have ever received less than full respect or attention from a doctor, police officer, storekeeper or other adult because of your age.
16. You have ever been hit by an adult or peer.
17. You have ever hit a peer or someone younger than you.
18. You were ever forced to fight or defend yourself against another student
19. You or someone you know personally ever drank, took other drugs, overate, or did something risky or unsafe in order to cover their feelings or hide painful feelings.
20. You ever said no to, interrupted, or resisted being hurt by an adult or someone your age.
21. An adult or someone your age ever stood up for you.

Close by having all students sit in silence for a moment, and notice their feelings. Thank them for their participation. Then have them break into groups of three to take a few minutes to talk to each other about what they felt and noticed during the standup, obeying the confidentiality agreement by not speaking about any other students. (If you sense that there will be reluctance to break into groups, have students first (or instead) take out writing materials and write privately for 3 minutes about this activity and how they are feeling before breaking into groups.)

Bring students back into the original circle. Have several volunteer to say what they (not their triad partners) are thinking about.

3. Adulthood

15 minutes

Explain in what follows that students will focus first on *adulthood*—direct mistreatment of young people by adults—and then on *internalized adulthood*—what young people, as a consequence of adulthood, may start to do to mistreat each other.

a. Adulthood

Ask students to cite several examples of adulthood they can remember from the stand-up. Repeat the definition of adulthood as an oppression: a name for how adults as a group have power over young people as a group and use that power to control them—hurt them, make them feel bad, or get something from them—or receive better treatment, more privileges and more resources than them.

Acknowledge that, of course, adults raise and care for young people and need resources to do this. Ask students to give examples of the difference between being responsible for/caring for young people and mistreating them or having unequal privilege.

Questions:

- How are adults given more power than young people in our society? Looking at the different institutions that shape a community (family, educational, media, legal, financial, business, medical, military, &c.), give examples of adults having more power than youth.

(Ans.: Adults can vote; can drive cars; own and run corporations and media (and therefore, e.g., make all decisions about what clothes to make, what music to produce, what working conditions to provide for young workers, &c.); make and enforce all laws about youth conduct and appropriate behaviors; decide on all educational standards...)

- How do adults sometimes use power over young people to hurt them, or make them feel bad, or control them?
- How does that use/abuse of power affect young people?
- Pick an institution: give examples of young people being stigmatized or controlled in that institution. *(Ans.: in the institution of education: students can be judged by adult-defined academic standards and “tracked” into different classes and career paths with different statuses; students can be labeled with disciplinary “problems” and placed in special-education classes, prescribed behavior-controlling drugs, or alternatively suspended or expelled, &c.)*
- Pick an institution: give examples of adults as a group using power over youth, having more privilege, prestige, resources or control than young people in that institution. *(Ans.: in the institution of the workplace: adults can define standards of job performance, hour and wage schedules, work pace and environment, who is promoted and who is fired, what is “appropriate” clothing and behavior, &c.)*

b. Internalized Adultism

Reintroduce the three photos from session 1. Circulate them for a few moments to have students refamiliarize themselves with the scenes. As they examine the pictures, invite them to focus their attention on the young people in each.

Conduct a brief visualization: have the students imagine that they know one of the young people depicted. Have them think of things about this young person, as depicted, they might not like, or might find themselves silently criticizing. Have them write down anything that comes to mind that counts as a criticism, a dislike, even a putdown they might feel like making against this young person. When they have finished, have a few volunteer what they’ve written.

Now return students’ attention to the youth column on the butcher paper posted in front of the class. Remind them that they wrote down negative phrases or words in this column that they some times worried applied to them. Have them think of the phrases they picked. Have them write this phrase underneath the criticism or putdown they made of the young people in the photographs. Then have them examine the two sets of words:

phrases criticizing the depicted youth
e.g. weird, wimpy, stupid, just a kid, asking for trouble
phrases that I worry might apply to me
e.g. ignorant, just a kid, immature

Ask what connection, if any, can be found between what they thought about the pictured youth and what they worried about in themselves, whether these are the same or opposite. For those who can find connections, either similarity or oppositions between the two sets of words, have them report what connection they can find.

Reminding students of the heart exercise, point out that children, as “hearts,” experience stereotypes and mistreatment from adults; when this happens often enough, they may “internalize” the adultism, beginning to put themselves down, or put other young people down. One way it works is that when as a young person I’m made to feel bad about myself, “internalizing” the adultism I’ve experienced, I may try to survive by turning that bad feeling onto someone else of my age or younger.

Ask students to give examples of internalized adultism that they can remember from the stand-up exercise.

Finally, ask them to think silently of the phrases they wrote in session 1—negative phrases about young people that they sometimes worry might apply to them. Have them think about where this feeling might have come from. Invite them especially to connect it to any experience of adultism from the stand-up that applied to them.

4. Speak-Out

10 minutes

Write the following open statements on the board:

- One thing I love or am proud of about young people or about being my age is _____
- One thing I never want to see, hear or have happen to young people again is _____
- One thing I want adults to know is _____

Explain the speak-out: anyone can volunteer to stand up and make a statement to the group that begins with any of the statements. It is not necessary to raise hands; when someone is ready, she can stand up and speak. Make the statement, then sit down to allow the next person to speak. Make one statement at a time; students can get up again later to make another statement, but allow time for other people to speak.

Conduct the speak-out for 5-7 minutes. At the close, if there is time, take a few minutes to have participants “report back” what they heard so that the speakers know that they were heard. Explain that anyone who would like to may stand up and repeat a statement to the group that they heard someone else make, beginning the report back with “I heard you say…” repeating what they heard as carefully and accurately as possible without summarizing or adding their own words.

5. Conclusion: one strength I have

10 minutes

Close by having the circle draw together again and having students produce the paper on which they wrote down the negative phrases about themselves and the young people in the photographs. Place a wastebasket in the center.

Remind students about taking care of themselves outside class and at home and that there are adults available for them to talk to. In the next session they will turn to think about having adults, and each other, as allies.

Have students tear up their papers, stand, and bring the pieces forward and throw them away, returning to their seats but remaining standing. In the closing circle, have students volunteer to complete the phrase: “one strength I have is _____”

SESSION 3. Adults

Aims

- To explore the conditioning process of young people to be adults
- To identify benefits and costs of adultism to adults
- To define the concept of being an adult ally

Skills

Students will:

- Identify pressures placed upon young people in their transition to adulthood
- Understand benefits and costs of adultism for adults
- Specify what an adult ally does and does not do
- Prepare statements for designated adults they want to be allies to them

Preparation

You will need 30-40 shoeboxes, blocks, tin cans, books or other hand-size objects bearing labels listed below. Prepare two or three of each of the labels.

Session Description

This session examines the conditioning process of becoming an adult, identifying the costs and privileges of adulthood and the requirements for being an adult ally to youth.

Session Outline

1. To Begin	5 minutes
2. What's an Adult?	20 minutes
3. Adults as allies	25 minutes
4. Conclusion	5 minutes

Agenda

1. To Begin

5 minutes

Remind students of agreements. Ask them to “check in” for a few moments about the aftermath of the last session: how they were affected, in any way, by the standup exercise, and what they noticed about their own experiences of youth and adults since the session.

Introduce this session, which will focus first on adults and then on adults and young people as allies.

2. What's an Adult?

20 minutes

Remind students of the phrase “Grow up!” from the first session. Obviously young people experience some pressure about becoming adults, and face some expectations about what it means to be an adult. What is this phrase saying about what is required for someone to be an adult? Particularly young people at this time in their lives may be encountering lots of messages about what they will be expected to do to become fully-functioning, successful adults.

a. Costs

Have one student volunteer to be the person “becoming an adult,” standing at one end of the room. Have the remaining students line up in two lines facing one another: the volunteer will be walking the “gauntlet” between them. Line up labeled shoeboxes along the “path.”

Labeled shoeboxes include two or three each of:

Job	Military service	Children
Career	Car	Children’s education
Education	Money	Citizenship
Family	Credit	Elder parents
Home	Retirement	

The task of the volunteer is to walk through the gauntlet; students in lines may pick up boxes and hand them to her to carry, along with commands about what she/he is to do as the fully-functioning adult with that box. E.g., with the “Education” boxes, the instructions might include:

- finish high school!
- go to college!
- get a degree!
- get good grades!
- get an advanced degree!

The task of the volunteer is to accept, balance and carry all of the boxes handed to her/him. The volunteer will eventually balance—or drop—some or all the boxes. When she/he reaches the end of the line, stop the exercise. Convene students to sit and talk about what pressures about “being an adult” are being experienced by them already—what it’s like to be expected to carry all the boxes.

b. Benefits

Now have the same, or a different volunteer “adult” sit in a chair in the center of the room, and have students pile the boxes in a small heap before her on the floor. Now each box represents a privilege adults have in this society. Have students think about and speak to:

- *privileges* adults have in this society, particularly privileges that are denied to young people.

You may assist in this discussion by asking:

- What financial privileges might they have?
- Who is more likely to get the attention of a store clerk? A doctor? A police officer? A teacher?
- Who votes on and makes the laws regarding young people? &c.

For each privilege, have a student remove one of the boxes, placing it behind the chair.

Close the exercise by summarizing: as with other “nontarget groups” like men, white people &c., the members of the nontarget group experience painful socialization (“costs”) to prepare them for their role, at the same time being given privileges (“benefits”) over the target group.

3. Adults as allies

25 minutes

a. Ally visualization

Explain that you will now turn to consider what it means for an adult to be an ally to young people.

Have students sit silently for the following visualization:

- Think of an adult you know—in your family, extended family, at school, in the community, or somewhere else—who at some time in your life stood up for you, backed you up, or supported you 100%. Go with the first person that comes to your mind. It might have happened a long time ago, or it might have happened this morning. It might be someone who was only an ally this once, who you only saw for a moment; or someone who might otherwise have made a lot of mistakes but, at least this time, was a real ally to you; or it might be someone who has for the most part gone on being an ally to you.
- Visualize the scene, if you can think of one, in which they acted as an ally. Get a mental picture of their face in your mind. Think about what it was they did that was an act of alliance—what they did, how it supported you and how you felt.

Close the visualization by having students break into dyads or triads to take turns talking about what they thought of.

b. What an adult ally does

Convene the class to brainstorm the following lists:

- What does a *real* ally—an adult or someone older than you—do?
- What is NOT helpful from an ally?

c. Speakout

Have students take out pencils and paper for the closing anonymous writing. Have each of them visualize an adult that she/he would like to be a better ally to her/him. This might be someone who is already an ally or someone who has not been an ally up to now. Have students imagine that they were doing a “speakout” to this person, and the person had agreed to listen and hear. Invite students to complete the following suggested statement as many times as they can about what they want “their” adult to know:

- one thing I expect from you as my ally is _____

Close the exercise by having students put their papers away and report their responses to the statement above to the full class.

Optionally, close by having them gather in dyads or triads once more to talk about how it felt to complete the writing.

4. Conclusion

5 minutes

Close with a reminder to students about taking care of themselves. While they have practiced asking adults for alliance in this session, it may not be safe for some of them to go directly to those adults with their statements. Explain that in following sessions they will begin to think

about organizing to deal with particular adults and, beyond individuals, to organize as groups of young people to intervene on behalf of young people with adults.

Session 4

Aims

Skills

Preparation

Session Description

Session Agenda

1. To Begin

2. Main Activity

Scenarios

scenarios

small groups

intervening with adults

intervening with youth

3. Closure/Conclusion

4. Follow up Sessions/Activities

Assessment/Evaluation