Framework for Understanding Adultism

Dysfunctional rescuing

We help young people because we assume that they cannot help themselves, or we help them in such a way that it limits their ability to help themselves. The result is that young people are ultimately set up to fail.

Young people are not given the chance to make important decisions or to take on responsibilities because we assume that they are not ready or we assume that it is too hard to keep them on track.

Example: Two young people are planning to do a presentation about a recently completed community service project at the agency's annual meeting. The day before the event the adult program leader sees that the young people are not that well prepared and decides to take over as the lead presenter.

Blaming the victim

We assume that the behavioral problems of young people are solely their responsibility. We do not consider that many young people have grown up in poverty, in dangerous neighborhoods, in poor schools, and among adults who are unable to care for them. As a result young people do not get the adult support they need.

We might give up on young people with behavioral problems because we believe they don't want to act right or because we feel that they don't deserve help until they help themselves.

Example: In a work readiness program a young person is repeatedly missing sessions and appointments (he relies on his parents for transportation). The program coordinator sees the young person as irresponsible and unreliable and decides to drop him from the program.

Avoidance of contact

There is lack of regular social or professional contact with young people and a lack of effort to learn about youth and the environments they live in. This leads to adults creating programs based on their own needs, not on the needs and interests of young people.

Adults might say that they do not understand youth, but they don't try to gather information about youth and do not ask them for their ideas, preferences, or interests.

Example: An agency administrator uses new funding to start up an after-school program for teenagers. He develops the program to best fit the structure of programming in his agency. Trying to maximize space utilization, he puts the new program into a room originally designed for a nursery school.

Denial of cultural differences

This is often motivated by egalitarian ideals involving age-blind or color-blind approaches. Age and cultural differences are assumed to be superficial. As a result young people are denied the chance to express themselves, to bring their own skills, beliefs, or lifestyles into settings.

Adults might either treat youth just like adults or just like children, not respecting that young people have contributions to make.

Example: The agency decides to have young people on their board of directors. One young person is selected and asked to be on the board. The youth is expected to attend every board meeting. The board meets once a month from 7-9PM in the agency's main office downtown.

Denial of the political significance of adultism

This indicates a lack of understanding or denial of the social, political, and economic realities of young people. It also involves discounting the fact that youth are not treated as equals or as real people in many of the settings where they live.

An adult might get frustrated when a young person continues to mess up after being given many chances to act responsibly. The adult does not acknowledge that other adults treat the same youth as a child.

Example: A group of young people is planning a teen center. Two group members are charged with investigating zoning regulations and related city policies. They decide to go directly to city hall to do the research. The receptionist initially ignores them; finally she asks what they are doing there. Asking to meet with a staff person at the planning department, they are told that staff does not have time to meet with them.

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