

Recognizing Adulthood & Increasing Alternative Caring Behaviors



Adulthood refers to behaviors and attitudes that discriminate against young people. It's based on the assumption that adults are better than young people and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement. This mistreatment is reinforced by social institutions, laws, customs, and attitudes.¹

To counteract adulthood, adults can instead act in supportive and respectful ways toward youth; these are known as alternative caring behaviors. Increasing alternative caring behaviors is an important step to addressing adulthood.

Use the reflection forms below independently or with your team to reflect on how (and how often) adulthood shows up in your TPP project and to consider what alternative caring behaviors you might implement or strengthen.

1. Bell, J. (1995). *Understanding Adulthood. A Major Obstacle to Developing Positive Youth-Adult Relationships*. YouthBuild USA.

Adulthood Reflection Tool

Type of adulthood ²	How often does this type of adulthood show up in our project?	What are 1-2 examples of how this type of adulthood shows up in our project?
<p>Dysfunctional rescuing Helping young people on the assumption that they cannot help themselves or helping youth in such a way that limits their ability to help themselves.</p>	<p>Never Sometimes Often</p>	<p><i>For example, telling a 17 year old what type of birth control method is best for them instead of sharing all methods and helping them make an informed decision for themselves.</i></p>
<p>Blaming the victim Attributing a young person's behavioral problems solely to the youth themselves, without considering the context of their lives.</p>	<p>Never Sometimes Often</p>	<p><i>For example, assuming a young person isn't interested in your activity because they have their head down on the table instead of checking in to see what's going on with them or what they need.</i></p>
<p>Denying cultural differences Taking an "age-blind" approach that, ultimately, sees adult culture as the "right culture" and forces youth to adapt to these norms. This approach indirectly treats youth cultural practices as inferior or incorrect.</p>	<p>Never Sometimes Often</p>	<p><i>For example, assuming new technology is bad instead of listening to youth and understanding how they are using the technology.</i></p>

2. Visions, Inc. and Camino & Associates, Inc.

Type of adultism ²	How often does this type of adultism show up in our project?	What are 1–2 examples of how this type of adultism shows up in our project?
<p>Avoiding contact The lack of regular social or professional contact with young people, and the lack of effort to learn about them and the environments in which they live.</p>	<p>Never Sometimes Often</p>	<p><i>For example, choosing an evidence-based program (EBP) curriculum based on what you think young people need instead of holding a focus group to inform curriculum selection.</i></p>
<p>Denying adultism A lack of understanding or denial of the social, political, and economic realities of young people. It also involves discounting the fact that young people are often not treated “as equals” and don’t have many of the same rights and privileges as adults.</p>	<p>Never Sometimes Often</p>	<p><i>For example, not having a clear understanding of how local, state, and federal policies impact young people’s sexual and reproductive health or not appreciating that youth are unable to vote on these policies.</i></p>
<p>Other forms of adultism in our project</p>	<p>Never Sometimes Often</p>	<p><i>For example, implementing a lecture-heavy curriculum with no opportunities for youth to apply what they are learning.</i></p>

Alternative Caring Behaviors to Counteract Adulthood

Type of adulthood ³	Alternative caring behavior	Guidelines for implementing this behavior	How can we implement or strengthen this alternative caring behavior in our project?
Dysfunctional rescuing	Functional helping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resist doing things for young people that they can do for themselves. Give youth clear and constructive feedback that notes positive behaviors as well as areas for improvement. Engage young people as partners in formulating plans to improve their lives or behaviors. 	<p><i>For example, by teaching a 17 year old about all effective methods of birth control and connecting them with an adolescent-friendly clinic that can support them in choosing a method that's the best fit for them.</i></p>
Blaming the victim	Taking responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define how your own thoughts and behaviors contribute to a situation, rather than jumping to conclusions about the young person's behavior. Do not degrade the concerns or issues of any young person. Do not assess young people by using the standards of your own group. 	<p><i>For example, by connecting with a young person who has their head down on the table to learn what's going on in their life. Did they work late last night? Did loud noises keep them awake? Are they hungry? Did the curriculum raise an issue for them that they want to talk about in private?</i></p>
Denying cultural differences	Recognizing and appreciating differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grant equal respect to young people's cultural beliefs and practices; don't presume adult ways are automatically better. Develop an awareness of your own expectations of young people and adults. Identify your verbal and non-verbal communication patterns, especially ways of communicating that may be inappropriate for use with young people. Do not assess other young people by using the standards of your own group. Do not assume you understand young people; do not assume young people are like you. 	<p><i>For example, by asking young people what they think and listening when they talk about their thoughts, experiences, and feelings about being a young person today.</i></p>

Type of adultism ³	Alternative caring behavior	Guidelines for implementing this behavior	How can we implement or strengthen this alternative caring behavior in our project?
Avoiding contact with youth	Making contact with youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make an effort to learn about the lives and concerns of young people. • Make it a priority to get to know and interact personally with young people. • Be open to changing your attitudes and beliefs based on your experiences with young people. 	<i>For example, by holding focus groups with youth to understand their needs, what they want to learn about sexual and reproductive health, and who they want to learn from.</i>
Denying adultism	Understanding and recognizing oppression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek knowledge about the political, societal, and economic realities of young people. Keep these ideas top of mind; it is easy to fall back into mainstream thinking. • Avoid depending on only one or two sources of information. • Develop critical thinking skills. • Recognize that people's personal experiences are a valid source of knowledge. 	<i>For example, by asking youth what they think about the local, state, and federal policies that influence their education and access to sexual and reproductive health.</i>

Note: This list is not exhaustive. Consider brainstorming other strategies that make sense for your TPP project.

This tool has been adapted and is courtesy of Health Resources in Action (HRiA).

This publication was supported by the Office of Population Affairs (Grant TPSAH000006). The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Department of Health and Human Services; nor does mention of trade names, commercial practices, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.