POWER STORIES

Training Handbook on Adultism for Daycare Centers, Elementary Schools and Families

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Introduction to the Training Handbook

In many ordinary, cheerful children‘s books, traces of hurtful, violent behavior by adults towards children appear as a matter of course, often unremarked.

For most children, the same thing occurs in their everyday lives.

Sometimes adults yell at children, punish them, reward them or smile down at them. They say, „Stop making such a fuss,“ or „I‘ll count to three...“ They may scowl judgmentally at children, or grab them by the arm.

These behaviors toward children are especially problematic when they are justified as necessary or appropriate and children get the message that it is „normal“ and acceptable for adults to treat younger people like this.

This behavior is still very common in educational and parenting contexts today.

Although it may not be the adults‘ intention, these acts damage children‘s self-esteem and sense of self. Children experience themselves as less valuable and trustworthy and, to a certain extent, lose touch with their own unique way of being. Their relationships with adults are also marked by loss of trust.

Yet, at the same time, we truly desire completely different interactions.

If we want to set out to transform the relationships between children and adults, it is helpful to become aware of adultism and its multiple, self-evident effects.

Developing this concsiousness is the starting point for the book „Power Stories.“ Its intention is to show us everyday transgressive, harmful behaviors of adults towards children and take them as an impetus for discussion and change.

The „Training Handbook on Adultism for Daycare Centers, Elementary Schools and Families“ is intended for everyone who accompanies children in growing up. It aims to support teachers, parents, grandparents and all other caregivers in dealing with this complex topic.

It offers many impulses, background knowledge and resources for more in-depth discussion. It invites us again and again to pause and to question habitual behaviors, without sinking into paralyzing self-criticism. It answers some questions and raises others.

The learning process can be fun and empowering, too.

The „Book for Children about Living with Adults,“ on the other hand, contains stories that are unusual, yet quite ordinary. They are about children who experience challenging situations with their caregiving adults and deal with them as best they can —and feel many emotions in the process. The stories are also about adults who, for their part, try to accompany children as best they can.

Sometimes they are desperate and full of worry, sometimes angry, sometimes insecure. And sometimes, they just listen.

The stories try to lead us to think beyond „right“ and „wrong.“ They neither want to condemn nor justify the behavior of adults. Instead, they show various approaches to daily challenges that have different effects on the people involved and their relationships. The stories hope to create space for dialogue and reflection.

They can encourage children to talk about their experiences with violent and hurtful behavior and reinforce that this is not „normal“ and okay, even if it often seems that way to kids. By showing that other ways are possible, the stories want to support adults in their self-reflection and development as well.

Ther book also has a website. At www.machtgeschichten.de you can find more texts, comments, all links from this book, current literature references and new, regularly updated pictures and stories.

Your feedback and your own stories

What have been your own experiences with power? How did you like the book, or where might you disagree with it? What questions concern you? What conversations have come up? Please feel free to write us your feedback about the book at kontakt@machtgeschichten.de.

Have you ever written a story for children? Or do you have an idea for a different ending for one of the stories here? Did children drawn pictures to go with the stories? There is also a place on the website for your stories, for new variations and for the pictures you have drawn. More about this at the end of this book under the heading „Make your own power stories!“

Notes on the choice of wording regarding diversity and anti-discrimination

I would like to discuss some of the phrases used in the book. For example, we often refer to parents, primary caregivers, and teachers. Parents can be all those who view themselves as parents. Sometimes it is a single father, sometimes two mothers, and sometimes it is three or more people who have decided to accompany one or more children together. The term (primary) caregiver refers to all other people who have a special relationship to the children, who take on the responsibility of accompanying them, and who may be present more or less often. I am thinking of friends, grandparents, new partners, aunts, uncles and neighboring adults. By teachers, I mean professional guiding companions, such as educators, teachers, or other professionals in daycare centers, schools, after-school care centers, or guided recreational activities.

Even though this is unfortunately not reflected in the writing style used in this book, it is also important for me to emphasize that wherever women and men are mentioned (e.g., in the case of boy- and girlfriends), this also refers to everyone whose personal identity lies between or outside the binary gender system that such language takes for granted. I would have preferred to mark all personal designations with language that recognizes and and normalizes gender diversity.

Critically, regarding adultism, I would also like to point out that wherever I use the terms „child“ or „adult,“ I mean unique individuals who can be variously competent, responsible, reflective or emotional and who happen to be of different ages.

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Anne Sophie Winkelmann

Educational power and adultism

Power pervades all interpersonal relationships in the social context. Parent-child and educational relationships, in particular, are marked per se by a power imbalance favoring parents and educational professionals, which has a variety of largely unconscious effects.

But I don‘t have any power!

When we first hear about having power over children as adults, as caregivers, or as parents, it can raise many questions within us. Power? Who, me? No! I usually feel pretty powerless myself!

Power is also usually associated with a number of unpleasant ideas and feelings, and most people prefer not to relate themselves to it at all. As a result, it is rarely talked about.

Only in recent years have we seen more frequent discussions about power and violence in the context of education. Gradually, it is becoming clear that power itself is not the problem, but rather how we deal with this power and how we can avoid its abuse.

Power in this sense is understood as the ability to assert my concerns, my will, and my definition of what is „right“ and „wrong,“ valuable and relevant. Power gets attributed to people through their

membership in certain social groups in society (such as adults) and their concrete positions (such as teacher, mother, grandfather, primary caregiver). Power is founded on a mutual recognition of this attribution by the specific individuals, the community and society.

Social power relations are „always two-sided relationships, in which one side has more (...) power and can exert influence and the other side accepts this without protest, or can be persuaded to tolerate or comply, despite resistance.“ (Hansen / Knauer / Sturzenhecker 2011, p. 28). The power of parents, primary caregivers, and educators is legitimized by prevailing social discourses, structures, and laws. In the vast majority of cases, children completely accept this as well.

Power to act and create:
The educators design the framework, the rooms and the processes in the facility. They decide on current topics, projects, materials and influence the processes in the group.

Power of disposition:
Educators have access and resources at their disposal. They know where things are and decide when they are used, they determine which materials are too dangerous or too valuable, and they know what money is available and how it is spent.

Power to define and interpret:
Educators define what is good and right or bad and wrong; they set the rules and project their knowledge and experience into the room, which has a lasting impact on children‘s opinions.

Power to mobilize:
Educators can get children to conform to their beliefs by firing

them up with cheerful enthusiasm, enticing them with catchy ideas, sweet-talking them, or convincing them with strong arguments.

It soon becomes clear: The legitimized exercise of power (for example, by making decisions or giving orders) can also quickly lead to violence in practice. If children do not comply of their own free will with the wishes of caregivers or educators, but resist, then adults have good possibilities to enforce their requests, even without the acceptance of the younger people. From this position of power, an adult can resort to a variety of strategies that are justified as „normal“ and appropriate, even though we may well understand some of them as violence.

If we want to set out to build equal relationships with younger people, the best place to start is by asking ourselves:

When do I act from my position of power in a way that oversteps children‘s boundaries, restricts their self-determination, or violates their dignity?

What is violent, transgressive, abusive behavior?

When we speak of violence in education, in daycare centers or elementary schools, the first thing that comes to mind is physical violence, such as beatings. Most people have nothing to do with such behavior, and so we quickly dismiss the concept of violence. Even so, physical violence by parents and caregivers is still much more widespread than we would like to believe. We could call it physical violence, for example, when a child is hit, grabbed firmly by the arm, pulled away or off the climbing equipment, or when we

finally „stuff“ a child into a jacket.

Even more widespread are forms of emotional assault. In our everyday use of the term, we may not necessarily label them as violence. However, the German Civil Code does. Since 2000, it states:

> Children have a right to be raised without violence. Physical punishment, emotional damage and other degrading measures are inadmissible (§ 1631 BGB, paragraph 2).

In this sense, we can understand a wide range of everyday behaviors by parents, caregivers and professional educators towards children as violence and boundary transgression.

For example: Name-calling, judgments, punishment, threats and a multitude of insinuating comments, with which we hurt children and hinder their development of a healthy sense of self and self-esteem.

How often do children receive the message from adults that they are somehow wrong?

Upon even closer examination, we can see that very „quiet,“ seemingly „nice“ behaviors can be violent and hurtful as well, such as unsolicited lecturing in a friendly voice, smiles, praise, and rewards. Again, as adults, we naturally position ourselves above the child.

The quietest of all ways to use violence is to ignore children and withdraw our love „to teach them a lesson.“

For me, the notion of boundary crossing or transgression proves very helpful in examining adult behavior in the context of childrearing.

> *Am I staying grounded in myself, so to speak, or am I overstepping onto you? Am I talking about me, how I am feeling, what is important to me and what I need? Or am I judging and interpreting you? Am I crossing the boundary between me and you? Am I crossing your personal boundary?*

Violations of boundaries like these take place in many widespread forms of communication. For example, they occur when a child‘s behavior is interpreted and judged, when the other person gets blamed for my feelings, or when, instead of offering my concern, I assume that a child is incapable. When I know best whether children feel hot or cold, or why they are behaving this way, and all about what will happen if they keep it up.

Everyday, ordinary violations, we might say.

These are all forms of violent behavior by adults towards younger people. Many of them happen unconsciously in daily life, „automatically,“ as it were, and often remain unnoticed, in a certain sense. This violence is justified in the context of education, while its impact on children is downplayed. It is still far from self-evident to recognize these behaviors as violence that must be prevented. To raise our awareness, we can ask ourselves this compelling question:

> *Would I behave like this in a comparable situation with an adult person? Would I speak like this to a good friend?*
> *In this tone of voice?*

Probably not.
In order to comprehend why the same behavior towards an adult can be judged as violence and towards a child as possibly quite appropriate, an understanding of adultism can help.

What is adultism?

The term adultism is derived from the word „adult.“ In combination with the ending -ism, the term refers to a social power structure, similar to sexism or racism. Adultism refers to the unequal power relationship between „adults“ and „children“ that permeates society and interpersonal relationships, and refers to oppression and discrimination towards younger people.

Ritz, Manuela (2008). Adultism - (Un)known Phenomenon: Is the world made only for adults? In Handbuch Kinderwelten. Diversity as opportunity - Foundations of prejudice-conscious education and childraising, pp. 128-136. Freiburg. Longer version also see here: http://sfbb.berlin-brandenburg. de/sixcms/media.php/ bb2.a.5723.de/Workshop6a.pdf.

Adultism is everywhere and manifests itself in countless forms in society. Adults (and in certain situations, older children) benefit from this oppressive relationship and often contribute imperceptibly, unconsciously, and unintentionally to maintaining it.

Adultism is based on the social construction of difference based on the category of age.

It is not about possible differences between a specific younger and older person. Rather, it involves the construction (= establishment of social categories) of being a child and being an adult, and value

judgements about them, from the perspective of an adult norm.

Simplified, we can imagine it as if two boxes were set up (one for adults, one for children) and all of the very different people in society were sorted into them on the basis of their age. Often, people younger than 18 end up in one box and people aged 18 and older in the other. Depending on the context, more specific age-related pigeonholes become relevant, such as toddlers, three-year-olds, adolescents. Other sorting criteria, such as gender, social origin or the birthplace of parents/grandparents, also play a role.

Societies produce certain shared images and ideas about a „group“ constructed in this way. Attribution is a useful term for this process: Based on age, society‘s adult perspective will attribute characteristics, learning goals, abilities, motivations, and so on.

„When adults assume that they are more intelligent, mature and competent than children and adolescents and can therefore dominate young people without their consent, then that is adultism.“ (NCBI 2004, P 10)

For instance, children are attributed with selfishness, maybe with defiance, but also with cuteness, recklessness, immaturity, or unreliability. Adults, on the other hand, are considered and perceived as smart, experienced, far-sighted, responsible, and trustworthy.

Being an adult is the norm in this society. The characteristics and competencies attributed to the „ideal adult“ are the yardstick by which children are viewed and measured. And as norms tend to do, this one makes the relationships seems so normal and self-evident that it is not easy to question them.

Adultism, like other forms of discrimination, takes place on different levels that influence and support each other. For example, according to Manfred Liebel, we can identify four categories of discrimination that affect children in society.

1. Measures and punishments against undesirable behaviors by children that are tolerated or considered normal among adults;

2. Measures that are justified on the grounds of children‘s special need for protection, but ultimately lead to additional disadvantages for children, either by limiting their scope of action or by excluding them from social life;

3. Children‘s limited access to rights, goods, facilities and services compared to that of adults;

4. Disregard for children as a social group, in political decisions that negatively impact children later in life and for generations to come.

(Liebel 2010, p. 310)

Adultism in discourse

We as educators, parents, caregivers or simply as individuals may actively and consciously reject, or simply not share, certain deficit-oriented views of children and their related attributions. Even so, these ideas surround us constantly.

We find prevailing images and judgments about children and their positioning in society, particularly, in parenting guides, children‘s books, films and novels, in conversations with our parents, therapists and teachers, and also with neighbors, subway drivers and cashiers.

In fact, almost all adults seem to know a great deal about children, their traits, and how to deal with them, and most are happy to share their „knowledge.“

This is what is meant by a dominant discourse.

Adultism is when younger people‘s freedom and self-determination is unjustifiably restricted. Who justifies the restrictions?

Of course, there are also ongoing negotiations and changes within society and a variety of methods and practices for dealing with children. However, the dominant discourse is very powerful. It prevails by offering us „adultist lenses“ that distort our perception in a specific way and through which the pigeonholes, attributions, interpretations and judgments are confirmed over and over.

Adultism in structures and institutions

Structures, institutions, regulations and laws also exist against the backdrop of this dominant discourse and grant rights, opportunities and access according to age.

At the national, regional, and municipal levels, young people under age 18 do not have the right to vote. Even within institutions they attend, children usually have little or no say in the content, staff, concepts, or design of the spaces.

Richter, Sandra (2013). Adultism: the first experienced form of discrimination? Theoretical foundations and relevance to practice.

http://www.kita-fachtexte.de/texte-finden/detail/data/adultismus-die-erste-erlebte-diskriminierungsform-theoretisch- grundlagen-und-praxisrelevanz/

In the standard school system, children are usually taught in age-homogeneous classes. They work according to a curriculum developed by adults, which often still focuses on imparting knowledge rather than independent learning. The students‘ performance, but also their behavior, is judged by grades.

Even in the basic architecture of a city and of buildings, we recognize for whom the world is built. Stairs, door handles, light switches, pushbuttons at traffic lights: Everything is at a good height for standard-sized adults.

Internalizing adultism

When young people experience on a daily basis that their interests, needs, and feelings are not heard, not included, or even devalued, they gradually adopt the message that they are less valuable and less trustworthy (for in-depth research, see Juul 2008). On their own, they begin to believe that adults have more knowledge and competence and that it is okay for them to be in charge. This can lead to low self-esteem, low self-worth and a lack of confidence in themselves.

The following quote, which emerged during an interview with children at a daycare center, can be understood as an extreme example of internalized oppression in the context of adultism. When asked what children are like, a child replies:

> They fight, get angry, act up, they cry sometimes, they are also bitchy, they scream loudly too, they are bad, they don‘t want to listen, they want to have everything. So, that‘s all I can think of. (Schirmer 2012, p. 36).

In everyday life, we‘re more likely to hear remarks like this one, from a child in a workshop: „The adults make the rules because they know better than we do.“

Internalization of adultism in adults

Every caregiver, parent, and educator knows situations in which they talk down to a child in an I-must-teach-you-something mode, or argue in an I-know-better mode, or threaten, punish, or reward in an I-must-raise-you-well mode. Even after much reflecting and defining for ourselves how we want to deal with children in a non-violent and equal way, there can be a voice inside us that interjects a very clear idea of obedience, punishment and guilt at critical moments. Sometimes it‘s louder, sometimes softer, and it‘s also very different from person to person. The voice cuts in especially when excessive demands limit our own attention to the concrete situation, or when topics are involved that we carry from our personal history. Perhaps, for instance, it‘s about food, or expressing anger towards an adult. Then a kind of default behavior might take over, learned from growing up in an adultistic world.

To recognize these moments and use them as a starting point for reflection can be a goal and an approach for adultism-critical discussion.

If I want to examine my own actions in relation to adultism, I can also ask myself:

Does this serve the essential protection of the child?

How does this benefit me as an adult? Does this make things easier, more comfortable, more pleasant for me?

Does this serve to confirm, consolidate or maintain adult authority?

Intersectionality: The interplay of different forms of discrimination

An adult‘s position of power as does not feed solely on privileged positioning due to adultism. Rather, many different power relations play a role. For example, racism elevates so-called white people to the norm and designates Black people and people of color (these are self-designations) as deviants. In relation to a white adult educator, for instance, at least these two power relations are at play. Her power to define and interpret will also be normalized and supported by the fact that she is unquestioningly recognized as a member of the dominant majority society and is ascribed certain competencies, knowledge, characteristics, and perspectives that may not be taken for granted in the case of a Black educator. Even though the vast majority of child and youth work institutions explicitly or at least implicitly oppose racism, it is deeply anchored in all of our perceptions and thinking and in social discourses, due to centuries of tradition and reproduction, and its impacts are far-reaching.

A brief explanation of the terms Black, white and people of color can be found here: https://www.diversity-arts- culture.berlin/en/node/69

In addition to racism, other important perspectives for reflection about our own positions of power as adults and as educational professionals include ableism, sexism, heteronormativity, and classism. These terms, like adultism and racism, each refer to a prevailing norm in society. They criticize the production of difference established by these norms, the value judgments, different treatment and opportunities that social discrimination encourages.

Further explanations and many experiences related to the different forms of discrimination can be found in this German-language publication:

Tanyılmaz, Tuğba et al. (2013).: Intersektionale Pädagogik: Handreichung für SozialarbeiterInnen, ErzieherInnen, Lehrkräfte und die, die es noch werden wollen. (Intersectional pedagogy: handout for social workers, educators, teachers and those who want to become one.) In German. Download at: https://i-paed-berlin.de/project/die-broschuere-zu-intersektionaler-paedagogik

All these topics can be new and unfamiliar for many adults and educators, so it makes little sense to abstractly present these brief explanations alone. In any case, what is vital for practice is at least a basic understanding of different forms of discrimination, underlying social power relations and their concurrent effects in everyday life, practice and structures. This is also crucial because all of these lenses simultaneously filter our view of the children in the classroom, the neighborhood, the playground and the daycare center.

The attributions we make towards younger people are not

solely based on their age. Sex, gender, and the financial status and birthplace of their parents,

for example, can also play a significant role. Depending on a combination of visible markers of belonging, we perceive, interpret and judge each child‘s behavior differently. Our reaction can also vary simply due to the child‘s classification in the educational system. If reflecting enables us to become continually aware of these processes, we can expand our understanding and awareness of the effects of discrimination in practice.

Confronting adultism invites us to begin a journey of developing an overall practice that is aware of prejudice and critical of discrimination.

Adultism is also related to other forms of discrimination in another respect. In a sense, it lays a foundation as the earliest form of discrimination we experience. As Manuela Ritz writes:

> Adultism is the first fundamental encounter with oppression in every human life. At an age when learning is often unconscious, we experience what power, abuse of power, and powerlessness feel like and how power games work. As children, we are conditioned to believe that this is ‚normal‘, that there is a ‚top‘ and a ‚bottom,‘ and that it is desirable to be ‚on top.‘ This conditioning may be decisive in our acceptance of other forms of discrimination such as racism, ageism, heterosexism, and albeism as ‚normal‘ as well, to the degree that we do not recognize them; we manifest them ourselves, or repeatedly fail miserably to prevent consequential discrimination. (Ritz 2008, p.13)