

On Childism

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Abstract

Childism is prejudice against children. Its cognates include racism and sexism. ‘Childism’ was coined in 1975 but childism has existed since Roman times. This essay considers the origin and meaning of childism, the importance of retaining its meaning as prejudice, the origins of the prejudice itself, and the ways in which it is expressed. The context is rights advocacy by children. The aim is to assist children’s advocacy for rights and full personhood – the realization of rights – by understanding the fact and nature of childism.

Keywords: childism, children’s rights, childhood, children’s advocacy

Introduction

Why do so many adults dislike children, at least in the western world? Why are so many politicians, community leaders and adults in general dismissive of children's rights, reluctant to hear children, insensitive to the impact of law and policy on their lives, and dismissive of their opinions? "Have so many of us had such miserable childhoods that we do not want to be reminded of what it was to be a child or what it would mean to accord full personhood to little children?" Landon Pearson asked in correspondence with the author. "Systemic prejudice against children and adolescents is rife in North America. Children are either incapable or capable of all sorts of bad things so they need to be controlled 'for their own good'. But whose 'good' are we really talking about?" If someone other than the named recipient of a 'good' is the direct beneficiary of that good, then something is amiss. If adults are the beneficiaries of what adults do to control children – humiliation, silencing, corporal punishment – the good cannot be said to belong to children. Questioning prejudice against children is a question about childism and rights.

I begin by discussing wrong takes on children's rights. I then consider the origin of childism as a term for prejudice against children, a prejudice with profound social consequences including the generation of every other form of prejudice. Childism was recently redefined as a field of study covering the same ground as Childhood Studies. I show the dearth of comparable terms and argue for the retention of the original meaning. I point to the levels at which childism operates to perpetuate the ill-treatment of children and suggest that successful advocacy requires a deeper understanding of the origins, nature and pervasiveness of childism.

Rights and childism

Childism is the presumption of superiority of every adult over any child. It is personal and structural. Arising from childhood trauma passed on through countless generations, adult superiority is reflected in, and reinforced by, the social, legal and physical structures we erect. It has long been a particular feature of structures intended for children, including the family. Child reclamation projects – residential schools, child welfare systems, even the education system itself – are riddled with it. Old as it is, we had no word for it until the intersection of mass media, the psychiatrization of trauma, and the civil rights movement at the close of the 1960s.

“The theory of childism as the basic form of oppression evolved from a project concerning children and the mass media. We were studying commercials and the content of television in regards to racism and content analysis forced our attention to the similarities between racism ... and childism” (Pierce & Allan, 1975, p. 16).

Childism is prejudice against children. Prejudice works by creating identifiable out-groups whose characteristics are invented or exaggerated to prove that the group is undeserving of the quality of rights and life the rest of us enjoy. Separated from the larger society, subject to different rules and laws, disenfranchised, disrespected and willfully misunderstood, children, like those sexually- or racially-othered, are an out-group. As a primal trauma, childism begets all other forms of prejudice. Childism in itself, and as the origin of all forms of prejudice, is the antagonist of rights.

Many would disagree (McGillivray, 1994) by arguing that treating children differently and to their detriment is justified by children’s own failings. Their immaturity justifies condescension. Their subservient status justifies a host of infringements on their dignity. Punishing the body, considered by Roman and medieval jurists as the most severe form of punishment because it offends dignity, is now, with one exception, prohibited in all areas where it was once legal (McGillivray, 1997b). The exception is the parent-child relationship. According to the Supreme Court of Canada in 2004, the physical punishment of children is not assault but correction (McGillivray, 2012; McGillivray and Durrant, 2022). As circumstances calling for correction are endless – the court offers as examples putting children into car seats and ugly scarves – proof of corrective motive is not required. Whether assaulting children is in fact corrective was not considered. Children’s opinions are presumed to be uninformed or unformed and so of little value in deciding public policy, school discipline, the course of an individual child’s life, or whether children should be hit. Injustice is met with indifference: ‘they’ll grow out of it.’ Adulthood is the cure for the disability that is childhood. That this presumed disability may stem from lack of rights is countered by the argument that children lack the individual autonomy required to hold rights. Warm relationships are needed, not cold rights which would set child against parent and strip children of the protection of childhood. This is, in logic, a vicious circle.

These arguments twist fact as well as logic. The facts are that rights are not rewards for

autonomy; responsibility is not the price of rights and autonomy itself is never absolute but always relative to the collectivity (Nedelsky, 1993; McGillivray, 1994). Rights have meaning only in terms of the collective, as markers of relationships between individuals and the whole. Rights are not the antithesis of relationship but the structure that enables it. As for the facts of children's experiences of childhood, much is cloaked or distorted by sentimentality and the cult of innocence, by parental status and family privacy, and by the exclusion of children from most of the many halls of power. Investigating the conditions of childhood without talking to children, was the norm in psy and social studies so we do not, in fact, know very much about children's subjective experience. Assumptions about children, and not actual children, (dis)inform our understanding of childhood.

The twisted logic is this. Children and adults have exactly the same rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and all universal human rights declarations and covenants. Everyone's rights are subject to reasonable and legally justifiable limits. But the very qualities that make a child a child are turned against children to restrict rights without justification. The argument that anyone is better served by having interests or relationships in lieu of rights is deeply suspect. If children are disabled from making rights claims, then their legal status, however benevolent their treatment, is that of slaves, others, outsiders who are not us (McGillivray, 1994). The gap between us and them invites exploitation and abuse.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child views human rights through the lens of childhood. The primacy it accords to parents and religious leaders is problematic in a children's rights treaty. Education and belief are enumerated rights of the child. Control over both is given to parents and religious leaders, making these rights half-rights at best. Half a right is not always better than none. The public schools of the Bountiful, BC polygamous community, for example, were tacitly permitted to operate as private religious schools and were rarely inspected (Bramham, 2009; Jones, 2012). The schools failed to teach the provincial curriculum and to report children missing or otherwise in need of protection, as required by law. They assisted in the grooming of children for a system which exiled boys over 12 to life on the streets and girls to sexual abuse by much older strangers living far away. The Canadian Criminal Code ban on polygamy was constitutionally upheld by the British Columbia Supreme Court in 2011, in part on the basis of the harm done to children by polygamy's 'cruel arithmetic' (Jones, 2012).

Parental control is a hallmark of the convention. While this places parents in a strong

position vis-a-vis the state, it does not do the same for the child. The need to obtain broad state support for the convention may explain the outsize role given to parents who are mentioned 36 times; it is clear that childism affects even those who support children's rights-bearing status.

What is childism?

"Whatever qualities the child possesses, he is discriminated against simply because he is a child" psychoanalysts Chester Pierce and Gail Allen wrote in 1975 (p. 15). Inspired by the dismal portrayal of children in 1970s television ads – "They were dirty, they whined for their food, they retarded family cooperation, and they were 'physical creatures' as opposed to thinking beings" and they "were most commonly shown in a devalued way," Pierce and Allen (1975, p. 16) found a direct parallel in racism;

Childism is "the automatic presumption of superiority of any adult over any child." We think we love and prioritize children but "this is far from the truth." Adult "needs, desires, hopes, and fears" take "unquestioned precedence over those of the child" in a way that "goes beyond the biologic necessity that requires adults to sustain the species by means of authoritative, unilateral decisions."

If telling children what they need to do and making decisions on their behalf is a "biological necessity" as Pierce and Allen (1975 p. 18) wrote, then what matters is "*how* the decision is executed and *how* the child is afforded dignity and respect" (emphasis added). Childism includes, but goes well beyond, harsh parenting or abuse. The harm is caused by forced passivity and depreciation through "a constant barrage of microaggression" (p. 18):

In childism, the child-victim is put on the defensive. He is expected to accommodate himself to the adult-aggressor and is hardly ever permitted to initiate action or control a situation. The vehicle for most adult action is micro-aggression; the child is not rendered a gross brutalization but is treated in such a way as to lower his self-esteem, dignity, and worthiness by means of subtle, cumulative, and unceasing adult depreciation. As a result of this constant barrage of micro-aggression, the child remains on the defensive most frequently expressed in multiple forms of alienation.

The oppression of children leads to alienation and violence. It gives rise to racism, sexism and all other forms of discrimination and oppression: “We contend that childism is the basic form of oppression in our society and underlies all alienation and violence, for it teaches everyone how to be an oppressor and makes them focus on the exercise of raw power rather than on volitional humaneness.” Childism “is found in virtually everyone. Modification of childist practices would alter other oppressive systems that retard the development of humankind to its full potential” (Pierce and Allen 1975, p. 18).

Childism, then, hurts not only subsequent generations of children but also others who are identifiably different. Recognizing the deleterious effect of “the everyday microaggressions and humiliations suffered by people of color,” Pierce was the first to categorize racism as a public health issue (Kleinman et al., n.d., n.p.). As consultant to the 1960s Head Start television program *Sesame Street*, Pierce insisted that the show embody a “vision of an integrated society where everyone was a friend and treated with respect” (Lochner, 2021, n.p.). This would serve as a corrective to “the marginalization of African-Americans that children routinely saw on television and elsewhere in society” (2021, n.p.)

Childism “is built into the very way children are imagined,” psychoanalyst Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (2012, p. 5) wrote in *Childism*. “The natural dependency of children has been one of the key reasons for the prejudice against them not being recognized as such or its being so easily rationalized” (p. 55). Childism, for Young-Bruehl, stems from the capture of adults by their own childhood trauma. In the culture wars over state response to child abuse, the first “diversionary tactic” was to label abuse “a disease of the *child*. Not a disease of the *abuser* that is manifested on the *child*” (p. 106; and see Kempe et al., 1962). But adults defending children are unwilling to blame other adults. Meanwhile, the growing misperception that children’s rights interfere with parental rights and family values fed into, and continues to sustain, childism. This division emboldened the “anti-child political elite” that began with Richard Nixon and the leadership of Ronald Reagan, defeated “every concrete pro-child program generated since Head Start began in the 1960s” (Young-Bruehl, 2012, p. 141).

Redefining childism – and then what?

Childism has taken a turn away from its original meaning. John Wall, founding director of the Rutgers Childism Institute, formerly known as the Center for Children and Childhood Studies, redefined childism as “feminism but for children” (Childism Institute, 2022; Wall,

2019). The parallel with racism is gone. Although childism “challenges and transforms the historically ingrained adult-centered assumptions that underlie children’s systemic marginalization” and “provides a needed critical lens for deconstructing adultism and patriarchy,” it “differs from alternative uses of the term childism” and is “[a]nalogous to feminism and other critical movements” (Wall, 2019). Again, this is a far cry from Pierce’s usage. As the author of the Wikipedia page on Childism, Wall dealt with critics by adding the Pierce definition of childism but suggesting that other terms are “more commonly” used.

“Childism can refer either to advocacy for empowering children as a subjugated group or to prejudice and/or discrimination against children or childlike qualities. It can operate thus both as a positive term for a movement, like the term feminism, as well as a critical term to identify a phenomenon … more commonly referred to as ageism, adultism or patriarchy” (Wikipedia. Childism, 2002).

Wall’s childism fills the space occupied since the 1990s by Childhood Studies. This field “interrogates the notion of childhood as a social category. How adults have thought about children and the impact that this has had on the ways children are treated are also analyzed critically and great emphasis is placed on historical, cultural and literary interpretations of childhood” (Oxford, 2022). The field insists “on the need for children themselves to be understood as the best informants of their own lives.” Children’s rights and parent-child relations “therefore are central to the field.” A comparison of Wall’s (2019) definition of childism with the Oxford (2022) definition of childhood studies shows that all elements are present in both. Why call Childhood Studies ‘Childism’?

Childism is not a field of study but a word articulating a prejudice. When Pierce was asked “what allowed him to perceive and describe childism” he answered, “because I am a Black person [and] children are the most oppressed group” (Myles, 2015 p. 11). Childism stands for the oppression of children by adults through daily acts of alienation, microaggression and violence. It is perpetuated across generations by parental modeling of the use of power to demean, exclude, enslave and otherwise treat other people badly. Young-Bruehl’s (2012) “first task” was to “make the term whose definition is ‘prejudice against children’ a part of our vocabulary” (p. 4) because it is a term with “political resonance” (p. 8) and it “applies across all facets of children’s lives” and “reflects their experiences” (p. 9).

The problem with changing the accepted meaning of a word is that we may be left with no word at all. What else might we call what Pierce called childism? Wall (2022) suggested ageism, adultism and patriarchy. They do not fit. ‘Ageism’ is prejudice against older people, usually women. ‘Adultism’ is vague and lacks purchase. ‘Patriarchy’ as a keystone of feminist analysis references the structural infantilization of women vis-a-vis men. Patriarchy as a political system is a hierarchical male-dominated property-based socio-legal structure found in some tribal societies and the laws of ancient Roman law whose concept of paternal power shaped the laws still governing childhood today (McGillivray, 2011). It does not address the kinds of prejudice children confront on a daily basis. Paternalism, sometimes conflated with patriarchy and usually connected with children, is about protection, however misguided or unwanted. It, too, is no substitute for childism.

Can we derive a new word for childism from Latin or Greek, which have lent so many useful words to the English language? Latin gives us *puer* (boy), *puella* (girl), *infantia* (infant, literally meaning ‘without [legal] speech’) and several child-specific words denoting ownership status. If I say in Latin that I saw thirty children at the park with their parents, I mean that all of them belong to one set of parents. Latin gives us no general word for child. The Greek for child is *paido*, from which we derive *philopedia* (love of children) and, incongruously, *pedophilia* (child-loving). Adding *miso-*, a late derivative of the Greek *mîsos* (hatred), gives us *misopedia* (hatred of children) as in misogyny (hatred of women) and misanthropy (hatred of people). Hatred is not the same as prejudice. Nor is fear, as in *ephebophobia*, the fear of adolescents, although this may help explain the extraordinarily high incarceration rate of Indigenous youth. With the steep rise in child-saving projects through the nineteenth century, *misopedia* fell out of use (Bruehl-Young, 2012 p. 5). “What is needed now,” Bruehl-Young (2012 p. 8) argued, “is a term that will have political resonance, something that can operate as *sexism* did to raise our political consciousness.” To reference the ideological, systemic and interpersonal legitimization of subordination and ownership, we need an *ism*. Childism is the best we have.

Childism at work

Childism, I suggest, operates on three levels: the personal, the systemic, and the state. The categories are not airtight. Much of what is inimical to children involves more than one level. A state policy endorsing family privacy, for example, translates into systemic non-intervention into family affairs, a seemingly neutral stance which is in actuality a positive act of

support of the domestic violence status quo (systemic level) which is in turn validation of the family member who controls other members through violence (personal level) (c.f. Olsen, 1985). Sexual, physical and emotional violence and neglect formed no part of the state's plan for residential schools but the design of the schools – closed to parents, isolated and rarely inspected; populated by the children of a people from whom all power had been stripped; under the unassailable aegis of the church – set the institutional conditions which attract private abusers and allow abuse to flourish.

At the personal level, childism consists of a set of learned semi-conscious biases against children. It is expressed in speech-habits and discourtesies, and it is justified by the presumption of superiority of any adult over any child. As with racism and sexism, childism is expressed on a gradient from microaggressions to corrective ('tutorial') violence. Alice Miller (1984) called this a poisonous pedagogy which seeks to break the will of children in fulfilment of adult needs for absolute control.

At the systemic level, childism reflects and refracts the legal origins and early development of the concept of childhood. The lineage of systemic childism is ancient and its precepts, all but forgotten, run deep in law and policy (McGillivray, 2011) but they run even more deeply in how we still think about children. We have largely forgotten how much the laws of ancient Rome have to do with our attitudes toward children. Roman precepts are deeply embedded in the structures and presumptions of modern law and policy. Remnants are seen in, among others, legal judgements, child protection law and policy, school participation and discipline, the exclusion of children from the public sphere and the reluctance of adults in positions of power to hear children in matters affecting them. The most egregious example of a Canadian law descended from Roman law and purely discriminatory toward children is section 43 of the Criminal Code which justifies child assault (state level) but operates on the systemic level of policing, social work and education as well as the personal level.

At the state level, childism is neither personal nor systemic but draws upon, and influences, opinion and action at all levels. This suggests that childism *in extremis*, if not always pathological, is always political. Because of the enormity of the policy failures involved, the cases of extreme cruelty and pathological hatred of children used by Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (2012) to exemplify childism can be placed at the state level. But there are wider implications. If public policy might deny adequate protection for children from abusive parenting, there are other

policy choices which inflict injury and death on children in far greater numbers. At this level we find, among others, total institutions like Indian residential schools, corporations whose products and services are aimed at children, child welfare and poverty policy, gun policy, child-deaf pandemic response, and maybe-unconstitutional voting laws.

Children institutionalized in Canada represent “the most underprivileged or marginalised groups in society” (Law Commission, 2000 pp. 1-2): Indigenous children, racialized children, poor children, children with disabilities, children declared delinquent. The power imbalance between the adults in charge and the children committed to their care is far beyond “the obvious power imbalance between a child and an adult in a position of authority.” The low social valuation of institutionalized children together with the secular or religious authority of leaders and staff disable inspection and stifle complaint, “a recipe for the abuse of power by predators” (p. 5.) “The characteristic of total institutions – disconnection, degradation, and powerlessness – have not been expunged from residential institutions for children” (p. 35). This analysis can be applied to children in dogmatic closed communities, religious or secular. It may be that childism, at least of the pathological sort, is a disease of complex civilizations.

The disease infected the colonized whose infantilization and degradation on the path of assimilation introduced new cycles of pathological childism in Canada and elsewhere (McGillivray, 1997c). Childism is core to colonization. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, Status Indian adults had been infantilized by Canada as wards of the state confined to reserves. Thousands of their children were placed in residential schools designed by Canada and the churches to instill Euro-Canadian norms in place of Indigenous culture, affiliation and identity. By ‘killing the Indian in the child,’ as it was once crudely put, the child would be ‘saved’ by assimilation. The dimensions of the ensuing disaster continue to emerge (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

The residential school system was a smaller piece in the larger state project of governmentality (McGillivray, 1997c). By the mid-nineteenth century, the remaking of the family had become a central project of western nations (Rose, 1990; McGillivray, 1997a). Parents were moved to enlist through the mass production and distribution of images of happy families and healthy obedient children. By installing in children a ‘governable soul,’ the adults they became would govern themselves in accordance with desirable social norms. As this ‘soul’ was also at the core of the nascent psy sciences whose work imposes the norm by defining and

treating the abnormal, these sciences became and remain integral to the governmentality project.

By the mid-twentieth century, a new player in the governance of childhood had emerged. This is the corporation (McGillivray, 2014; 2015). Corporations now produce and manipulate the dominant images of children and childhood. The stages of childhood have been remapped and the interests, play, pastimes, appearance, demeanor, aspirations and attitudes of children have been redefined to enhance sales. In matters of governmentality, the corporation has no equal. Its penetration of childhood is intimate, compelling, and ceaseless. Regulation-resistant social media corporations undermine political integrity, distort reality with ‘alternative’ facts and conspiracy fantasies, exacerbate children’s struggles with bullying, sexuality, self-worth, self-harm and depression, distract them from action, disable their imaginations, rob them of playtime, and make vast fortunes as they go. Illicit surveillance and sponsored social influencers touting kid-power and girl-power, engrain in children the belief that the right products and the right body are the rights that matter. Children’s rights to expression, play and learning – the right to be children – are drowned in a pounding sea of merchandising and self-hate. The new governmentality of childhood is childist.

As a result of the huge rise in corporate wealth, socio-economic inequality is at an historic low. The consequences for children are at their worst in the aid-resistant United States. Childism blocks essential reform. As economist Paul Krugman (2021) showed, “lifting children out of poverty is every bit as real an investment as repairing roads and bridges.” Children in poverty “begin life at a disadvantage: on average they attain less education, face greater health challenges, and are more likely to have difficulty obtaining steady, well-paying employment in adulthood.” Even in narrow fiscal terms, the benefits of “helping children grow up into more productive, healthier adults would eventually mean higher tax receipts and lower medical outlays. Unlike tax cuts for the rich, aid to poor children would largely pay for itself” (Krugman 2021). If the returns are as high as the predictions of the 450 economists who provided Krugman’s numbers, why don’t we invest more in children and less in, say, instruments of death?

The leading cause of death of children in the United States over the age of one year is gunfire. Opponents of firearm regulation are unmoved by the mass murders of schoolchildren and the astonishing death count of toddlers killed by household guns (Wamsley, 2022; Cochrane et al., 2022). In May of 2022, a Texas man four days out of childhood shot to death 19 third- and

fourth-grade schoolchildren and injured several more, in the 27th school shooting since January of that year. “The land of possibility stands paralysed, apparently unable to make even the smallest change that might save the lives of its young,” Friedland (2022) wrote. This is childism manifested at its most absurd extreme.

In setting pandemic controls that ignored children’s developmental, social and protection needs, Canada failed to give due weight to their interests and, as a result, badly miscalculated the impact of forced isolation, loss of schooling and lost play on children’s mental health, educational development and vulnerability to abuse (Children First Canada, 2020-22). Landon Pearson (2021b) observed that “few of the decision-makers who have been shaping the conditions under which we are now living have applied a child rights lens to the various policies they have adopted on our behalf because virtually every one of the many rights of children that are articulated in the UNCRC have been severely curtailed.” This reflects a disturbing lack of imagination about how, and how much, children’s needs and experiences differ from those of adults in similar circumstances. It is why we have an international agreement on children’s rights that is distinct from other human rights instruments that also apply to children. It is why we need to hear directly from children. Why do decision-makers shrug them off as ‘just kids’? Do they fear the erosion of their authority? Do they fear what children might tell them? Children have no political power but only soft power. One solution may be giving children the vote.

“Children represent nearly one quarter of Canada’s population, yet they remain the only disenfranchised citizens in our society” (Children First Canada, 2021). As of November 2021, the legal disability imposed by the Canada Election Act is under constitutional challenge by children ages 12 to 18 from across Canada. The Act restricts federal voting to citizens over 18. The challengers want the age lowered to 16, arguing that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the right of all citizens to vote, prohibits age-based discrimination and, with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, protects the child’s right to be heard. The challenge is not impossible. Wales, with other UK jurisdictions, lowered the voting age to 16 for council elections. Because local councils control the planning and funding of schools, housing, health care and social care, this change matters. David Runciman (2021) set out the many arguments for enfranchising children as young as six. “The young can plausibly claim that democracy presently discriminates against them in more ways than one. Not only are their votes regularly outweighed, but their representatives are rarely from their own generation.” Arguments against votes for

children “always start with the basic question of competence. But what that means is that we are applying standards to children that we have given up applying to anyone else.”

The consequences of ignoring children are severe, yet the presumption of adult supremacy structurally disables children from participating in the conduct of their own lives. This is the heart of childism.

Moving forward – and who does the heavy lifting?

Who bears the onus of combatting childism? Who does the heavy lifting? Michael Freeman (2020 p. 398) argued for a cultural revolution that “looks forward to the end of childism.” Without such a revolution, there can be only superficial reform that is “unlikely to survive and even less likely to penetrate our consciences.” Ending child abuse “in all its many manifestations” and genuinely offering children “the best they can be given” is not possible “until we understand the acts which harm them and the prejudices which structure and delegitimate them.” Among the reforms Freeman advocated is lowering the voting age to 16 and banning corporal punishment. “It must be outlawed immediately” (p. 404). The ban “will be judged as successful if it changes attitudes towards children, if it valorises the status of childhood and if it defeats childism.” Freeman’s cultural revolution gives much of the heavy lifting to the law.

Amélie Delage (2020) viewed childism as a wrong in itself, a pillar and a consequence of capitalism, and the genesis of all other forms of prejudice. For these reasons, “reclaiming children’s full humanity must be the cornerstone of any emancipatory political agenda.” In revolutionary projects, rights are paramount. Children “must grow up in a society where they are treated equally with adults, where they are valued as full human beings while they are still children, and empowered with the capacity to self-direct their actions and consent to their interactions” (p. 6-7). “Moving beyond domination, oppression, and capitalist exploitation requires a parenting praxis and educative paradigm that recognizes children’s full humanity as children.” Delage’s political revolution gives much of the heavy lifting to parents and teachers.

Convinced of the need to change institutional practices to ensure that children will be heard “before a new worldwide crisis overwhelms us,” Landon Pearson (2021b) called for the opening of “the necessary channels” and asked, “How can our young people help to make this happen?” For children to be “effective civil and political actors,” they not only “need to acquire real advocacy skills” but also “the appropriate machinery [must be] “constructed so that young

people can step on the levers of power.” For Pearson, the heavy lifting belongs to children, with some help.

More depends on hearing children now than ever before. If children are our future, they are above all their own. That future is under severe and certain threat. The history of childhood shows the origins, subtlety, and tenacity of childism. “We love children and want them to be protected and nurtured. We hate children [and] exploit children, if not in the mines and factories, then in the vast consumer and entertainment industries which increasingly define childhood in North America and Western Europe,” I wrote in 1994. “The lines between … sentimentalization and exploitation are slippery.” The slip is Freudian: these are not opposites but the two sides of the coin that is the owned status of children. This remnant of Roman law continues to feed childism and frustrate rights.

Children are the natural defenders of the future. In the best of worlds – the ones not so deeply childist – the law courts and legislatures which must adjudicate rights claims and limit or invalidate laws that unjustifiably violate them, and parents and teachers whose praxis is enlightened by children’s rights and children’s experience, will simply open the channels for children’s advocacy. As ours is not that world, more is needed. From the climate protests and litigation taking place across the world, to the Shaking the Movers initiative of the Landon Pearson Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children’s Rights, the child’s right to be heard and to be listened to is paramount. Accessing the halls of power is hard enough. Once children get there, childism can make advocacy a bewildering exercise. United States Senator Diane Feinstein’s inexplicable response to children advocating for climate action is an extreme but by no means unique example (Becket, 2019; McKibben, 2019). Government resistance has similarly given child-driven climate litigation a hard time (Juliana, 2021; Juliana 2022). Life on earth is at a deadly tipping-point but children advocating for climate action are met with suspicion – ‘who put you up to this?’ – which does deep injustice to them and weakens their credibility as advocates.

Being heard takes skill and persistence. It is time to prepare children for emotional resistance from those in power, ready them for hurtful responses and work with them to develop responsive strategies and tactics. Pearson (2021a) wondered, rhetorically or not, whether “so many of us had such miserable childhoods that we do not want to be reminded of what it was to be a child”. As advocates of “accord[ing] full personhood to little children” we need to

understand the depth of prejudice against childism, a pervasive set of inimical beliefs, day-to-day practices and deep infrastructure harmful to children. We need to examine our own childhood for experiences of prejudice, recall what we felt and consider the importance of “*how* the decision is executed and *how* the child is afforded dignity and respect” (Pierce and Allan, 1975, p. 18). We need to call it out for what it is – childism.

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