

# CHILDISM: AN INTRODUCTION



The Childism Institute  
Rutgers University Camden  
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# WHAT IS CHILDISM?

Childism empowers children by transforming norms and structures.

It is like feminism but related to children. It recognizes that young people are often disadvantaged compared to adults. And so it strives to change societies in ways that better respond to children's actual lives.

Childism therefore seeks children's radical equality. But it does so, not on traditional adult terms, but according to children's own distinctive experiences. It works to develop child-inclusive imaginations.

Childism understands that children are systemically marginalized. It critiques structures of adultism, whether in unjust power relations or in subtler habits of everyday discrimination.

And it finds in children themselves the resources to make societies more just. Just as the perspectives of women, minorities, the poor, and many different others improve life for all, so also must the perspectives of young people be empowered to reconstruct our shared worlds. Childism expands what it means to be human for children and adults both.





# HOW IS CHILDISM PUT INTO PRACTICE?

Childism is already being practiced, both by children and by adults. It is found anywhere that a person or group regardless of age challenges the adultist status quo and proposes different ways to act.

A more child-centered world is advanced when reversing long-term global warming, fighting roots of racism, investing in infants, making education meaningful, giving young people voices, and much else.

Just as men can be feminists and dominant groups antiracists, so also can adults be childists. This means striving to recognize the ways large and small that adults ignore or downgrade children's perspectives and experiences. And it means working to transform biases and social structures to become more child-inclusive.



If you work in education, are children treated with genuinely equal human dignity? Are they merely passive recipients of learning or active participants with ideas and knowledge of their own? Are students empowered to help shape school policies?

If you provide health care, are the views of young people given due weight? If you run a business, does it work not to discriminate against children and to respond to their particular needs? If you are a parent, are children treated as equal family members?

And if you are a child, do you see yourself as a valued and important contributor to your society and are you empowered to change adultist ideas and assumptions?

# HOW DOES CHILDISM CHANGE POLICY?



Childists fight for the equal consideration of children and youth in all local, national, and international arenas. They demand that children be heard and listened to from their own distinct perspectives.

This means in part uncovering and undoing the deep history of adult domination of all political spaces. It involves recognizing the lack of child and youth inclusion in both formal government procedures and informal policy movements and networks.

Childism supports and learns from child

activists and child-led social movements. It searches out creative new ways for children to claim their rights and exercise their rightful power in governments, organizations, and grassroots movements. And it does so on child-responsive grounds that recognize all humanity's deep interdependence.

Ultimately, childism calls for children's equal political representation, whether through voting rights, new democratic systems, empowered organizations, consciousness raising, self-awareness, or expanded social norms.



# HOW IS CHILDISM USED IN RESEARCH?

Childism is a critical lens like feminism and decolonialism that is deployed across the humanities and social sciences to better understand children's marginalized experiences. It generates fresh perspectives for both childhood studies and broader scholarship touching on children's lives.

The aim of childist research is to understand and transform systems of adultist normativity. It examines not only children's agency but also the intersectional ways that being a child involves both structural marginalization and social empowerment. And it looks to children's lived experiential differences to develop more child-inclusive social and scholarly imaginations.

Childism grew in the early 2000s out of the field of critical childhood studies. It contrasts with earlier uses of the term in literary theory and later uses in psychology. The difference here is that childism positively affirms children's perspectives and experiences as sources of systemic transformation.

In the social sciences, childism has been used as a lens to examine local and international political activism, children's citizenship, young and older children's engagement in education, child and youth migration, public play areas, young people in welfare, girlhood studies, and much else.

In the humanities, childism has provided a critical perspective on child and adult literature, biblical literature and history, histories of labor and suffrage, democratic voting norms, theories of human rights, philosophical and religious ethics, philosophical practice, and so on.

Childism shares much with childprism, intergenerational, and other critical childhood studies approaches. And it allies with feminist, queer, decolonial, antiracist, posthumanist, and other forms of critical scholarship, even as it offers critiques of them as well.



# FURTHER RESOURCES

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The Childism Institute  
childism.org  
+1 (856) 225-6080  
childism.institute@camden.rutgers.edu

Rutgers University Camden  
429 Cooper Street  
Camden, NJ 08102  
United States

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