

## **Respecting children**

Priscilla Alderson

The austerity cuts, global inequalities, armed conflict, and many other matters that constantly hit the news headlines especially affect children. With new problems looming in 2017, Quaker traditions of respect for children are needed today more than ever. Quakers' faith in the Divine Light in everyone is confirmed in examples of children's courage and wisdom. During the 1680s, for example, when the authorities locked up Meeting Houses and hauled adult Friends off to prison, children in Bristol, Reading and Cambridge continued to gather for Meeting in the streets, braving taunts and vicious beatings.

Children and young people aged up to 19 are one third of the people on the planet today, and societies and policies that are informed and fair take due account of them. This article reviews a range of reasons to respect children.

## **Children as precious resources**

To respect children by helping them to be healthy, happy and well-educated benefits everyone, because there will potentially be less call on costly healthcare and remedial services, less unemployment and crime. Younger generations contribute in many ways now, and they will richly repay older generations in future when they become the main workers and carers. The millions of child workers and carers today, on whom so many families depend, need the same rights and respect that adults claim.

## **Informed citizens**

Children are among the highest users of public services: healthcare, education and social services, social housing, public transport, libraries, parks and sports centres. The current austerity cuts and high rates of family poverty, homelessness and mental illness deeply affect children. Effective services are informed by their users, and children have plenty of ideas about how to improve them, and to promote public health, happiness and justice, so that it makes sense to involve them in doing so.

### **Genuine inclusion**

To respect children as responsible citizens now recognises that, for example, schools are more effective when run *with* children instead of *for* them or even *against* them. I have co-authored books with young children and teachers about how they ensured their school was fully inclusive, and how together they transformed another school from mayhem into winning awards. They all agreed that if inclusive and transforming policies are to work well, everyone has to be actively involved, especially the largest group of all, the children.

### **Courage and kindness**

Popular notions still prevail that childhood and youth are inevitably ignorant, irrational, volatile, unreliable, vulnerable and fairly helpless stages of life, needing strong adult protection if not coercive control. Childcare experts and protection lobbies who promote these fictions lay extra burdens and anxieties on parents and teachers, increasing adult-child tensions and discord. Women used to be dismissed in similar terms and, like many children now, were punished for protesting and being adventurous and independent. Age is no definite measure of maturity, and many young children show their courage, kindness and reliable good sense. At a personal level, so often when there is bitter discord between parents, their children continue loyally to love both of them. At a political level, Quaker research with child soldiers has reported their serious causes and reasons for joining armies; they were not simply mindlessly violent.

### **The roots of discrimination**

A foolish-child-wise-adult model is at the root of discrimination, recognised or not. It is the prototype for oppressions at all ages, the basis of sexism and racism, which see others as not fully human. It is then assumed that they are rightly mistrusted, they deserve and need to be dominated, manipulated and humiliated by being treated like children. Campaigns against any prejudice and discrimination therefore need to rethink this underlying model. And oppressed adults do not really help their cause if they protest against 'being

treated like children' when they are humiliated, since neither should children be treated like this.

Children suffer multiple discriminations, such as when they are black, in poverty and also a child, and anti-racism rings hollow if it respects adults but slanders black youths. Children and youths are the last and only social groups who can be vilified with impunity when 'childish', 'infantile' and 'babyish' are insults, whereas 'adult' and 'grownup' are compliments. Yet adults can be far more destructive and corrupt than children can ever be.

### **Experiencing equality**

To respect children avoids training and drilling them for years into unequal dominant-subordinate relationships. These undermine children's prospects for enjoying equal relationships of mutual respect, trust and solidarity, unless they are able to unlearn ingrained habits of inequality and mistrust. Quakers' concern for education through example and experience instead of empty instruction is greatly needed in all homes, schools and colleges.

### **Time and climate change**

Speed drives economics, industry, politics, consumption and the mass media, all interacting powerfully with climate change: 24/7 demands and deadlines, frequent elections with short-term policies, passing fashions and quick hot profits. Childhood, however, also involves future hopes and long-term investments. Present hasty policies that can especially harm children, now and over their lifetime after today's adults will have departed, need far longer-term imaginative thinking and action, drawing on youthful perspectives.

This will involve changing deeply-held values, such as that it is right to dominate and exploit nature. Feminists warned against the dangers of this assumption by comparing it to the history of women being dominated and exploited. Similarly, subconscious views that the natural world is like a volatile dangerous child to be tamed and controlled also need to be rethought.

### **Practical justice**

Although Quakers avoid legal disputes, the law courts provide essential protection for many neglected and abused individuals, children being among

the most vulnerable of them all. Yet in 2012, the government reduced legal aid for types of cases likely to involve children, such as housing, debt, welfare benefits, private family law and appeals against negligent services. Justice delayed or denied doubly oppresses young children waiting to be rescued from harm, because two or three years delay can be almost a whole life-time to them, and can cast forward life-long shadows.

### **Peace-making**

Childhood connects past to future generations by re-enacting ancestral histories. Topical examples include the lethal flaring up of centuries-old conflicts between European states and their former colonies. Hopes for peace and justice, as the 2016 Swarthmore Lecture considered, rest on respectful honest education, when children, young people and adults deeply examine how past wrongs influence present conflicts, how amends might be made, and how to turn vicious cycles into virtuous ones.

Like canaries singing – or dying - in the mines, children and young people can alert adults to serious problems, as well as to hopeful ways forward, with the need for all generations to face common problems together as allies.

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