Jan Mason calls for a rethink of the ways in which young people are treated in our society.

In my work with children who had been removed from their parents for reasons of abuse or neglect, I frequently saw children hurt in everyday interactions with those who were caring for them. This abuse was in the form of the words and actions of the carers. Children were being treated within the system as objects whose voices and views on their own lives were consistently ignored when decisions were being made that affected them. In seeking to explain how a system with goals of protecting children could so harm them, I began to look at how, in our broader society, dominant public and private attitudes to children treat them as lesser beings than adults, and silence their voices.

Prompted by the ways in which children’s experiences in care challenged official definitions of abuse, I attempted formally to explore the notion of abuse from the perspective of children as something that happens to children and young people in dysfunctional families, or as the act of an abnormal stranger. However, this view camouflages the extent to which a form of abuse, namely the oppression of children, can be seen as part of the very fabric of our society and of everyday adult-child interactions.

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In Respect Of Children

Jan Mason

FEATURESTORY
In ways that are oppressive of them, in particular, that adults could behave towards children in ways that children could not reciprocate. Smacking, they told us, harmed children because of the emotional hurt it caused; they said it harmed them because “you’re not allowed to smack anyone else but children...” and because they can’t smack back. In referring to smacking, these children were not talking about physical pain, or where and how a slap was inflicted, but emotional pain, experienced because adults could treat children in ways in which children could not treat adults (or, for that matter, adults could not legally treat other adults). They were linking smacking and other adult actions that hurt children with inequalities of power in relationships between adults and children.

The children felt that the fact that they were considered to be inferior to adults was linked to the ‘ownership’ that parents felt they had over them — “sort of like, it’s my kid, I can do whatever I want with them”; while other adults, such as teachers, could treat children as lesser people, and as they wanted to, because they were bigger. They could use their greater power to exclude children because, “You’re just a kid, you don’t count; you’re not one of us”.

In thinking about what the children were telling us, I saw a connection to children because, “You’re just a kid; you could use their greater power to exclude them...” and children because, “...because they were bigger. They wanted to, because they had power in relationships between adults...”

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that will already be evident in the families of many reading this article. This is what has been described by sociologist Anthony Giddens as a move towards emotional democracy in all human relationships. Giddens describes how, as with public democracy, so with personal relationships, we are increasingly aiming at an ideal based on equality between persons in terms of both rights and obligations. When concepts of emotional democracy are applied to the family, we can recognise that there has been a move away from traditional chauvinistic or patriarchal relationships between husband and wife, from seeing the man as the authority, to more sharing relationships based on concepts of equality. When these concepts are applied to children, emphasis is placed on respect and communication. Accordingly, children are understood to have contributions to make to the emotional and functional tasks within the family. The place of forceful disciplining, as in physical punishment, in these relationships is increasingly being questioned, both by parents and children. Further, as in relations between men and women, children’s right to speak out is given increased legitimacy. Family relations between parents and children are increasingly moving to ways of interacting that involve negotiation.

Children’s right to speak out and contribute to decisions that affect them has been formalised in the second current trend: the trend to set standards at domestic and international levels for how adults should behave towards children. Most significant for the way we treat children has been the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the convention in late 1990. In a small study by Natalie Bolzan and myself (published in 2009) of the ways in which the participation rights have been understood and implemented in Australia, we had discussions with eight policymakers and 23 schoolchildren and examined some policy and program documents. From this research, it appeared that the concept of child participation was broadly embraced by the children and also by the adult professionals who participated in our study. However, while only some of the adults interviewed agreed that it was appropriate for children to contribute to decision-making, children generally considered it important that they contribute to decision-making that affects their lives. The children not only wanted to contribute within their families and to their communities and policy forums outside their families, but often considered that they had an obligation to do so. They spoke about how they would like adults to give them opportunities to contribute within families and within their communities by enabling them ‘to have a say’ and by thinking of them as ‘near equals’. The transforming of child-adult relationships that would result from this help from adults (which our research indicates is underway in some situations and resisted in others) has the potential, if put into practice more generally, to embed in our society a new inclusiveness towards children.

In my opinion, the way we can lessen our oppression of children is to accord children, both in families and in public forums, equal rights with adults, and to respect them as beings who are persons now, not just ‘becoming[s]’ preparing for a future as adults. I believe that international and domestic standard setting, as well as research, supports the importance of adults conveying respect to children through listening to them and including their opinions in matters affecting them. Just as emotional democracy in family life and policies has moved us towards greater inclusiveness towards women in public arenas and challenged men to share power with women, so the suggestion that being inclusive of children may contribute to less oppression of them challenges all adults to work towards the establishment of more equality in their relationships with children.

The fact that children from a young age want this equality was made very clear to me by my first grandchild. Soon after she started school, she heard me use the term ‘children’s rights’ in discussion about a colleague’s work, and asked me what they were. In struggling to find the appropriate words to tell her, I muttered something like, “Some people think that there should be more sharing of power between adults and children”, and I asked her, “Do you know what I mean?” She fixed my eyes with hers, pointed at me and said, “Jan, go to your room.” Her reply implied that she not only pointed at me and said, “Jan, go to your room.” Her reply implied that she not only understood what I meant, but that I needed to understand that giving children more rights entailed for me and other adults a real challenge to our sovereignty; that being ‘grown ups’ did not mean that we deserved to be treated in a different manner from the way in which we treated children.