

Combatting Ageism: Going Back to the Beginning

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“Old people are all lonely.” “You look good for your age.” “I hate my wrinkles.” “I hope you stay forever young.” Ageism, or a silent prejudice engrained in our society telling us that to be old is to be less than, is a much more prevalent force than one might think. These stereotypes are deeply rooted in social stigmas, perpetuated by pop culture, and have been proven to be taught as early as age four.¹ Children are unconsciously learning “everyday ageism,” or the idea that old=bad and young=good, which is the foundation for age-based discrimination in our society.² This prejudice is not only cruel to the aging population, but ends up hurting the whole of society. We inherently undervalue an entire subset of our population, develop stress from the proposed burden of aging, and learn to fear a time in life that we will all inevitably experience! This crisis must be addressed, and should be done so by changing the way we teach the aging process to children.

Just as we have learned to start battling sexism and racism, we must fight the prejudices that attempt to confine and alienate certain groups. To do this, it is crucial for teachers and parents to reinforce the idea that everyone is unique and should be treated as such, without assumptions that can create power dynamics and isolation. If you are a teacher, parent, or an adult who interacts with young children, here are some basic steps you can take to help counteract the development of ageist attitudes:

1. **Educate children about stereotypes in general**—If kids are taught about the emotional repercussions of exclusionary behavior early on, they are less likely to participate in this prejudice throughout their life.³
2. **Read anti-ageism books**—Just as kids learn and absorb other societal norms through children’s literature, they can just as easily learn anti-ageist attitudes through books. Visit the attached link⁴ to find stories dealing with themes of the innovation in old age, celebrations of older birthdays, and much more! <https://booksforlittles.com/ageism-and-deathmisia/>
3. **Encourage discussions about how the media portrays age**—Pop culture is one of the biggest factors in promoting age-based discrimination. Since this is a large beast to tackle,

one way adults can combat this force is to address the bias seen in the media and discuss it with kids who are mature enough to have those conversations.³ Kids these days will inevitably be exposed to media, so it is more effective to acknowledge the bias they are seeing than to monitor what they see.

4. **Kids need to interact with older people!**—The best way to curb any kind of prejudice is to communicate, meet, and learn from others who are different from us. We can fight ageism in kids by exposing them to age, so they can learn to normalize and respect the aging process as a natural part of life.³ For example, recent research has highlighted that kids who have strong relationships with grandparents are less likely to be ageist.⁵ Integrate older individuals into the lives of children, and we can begin to fight the pull of ageism.

References:

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