

Red Flags 
a self-assessment for youth workers
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The most critical factors affecting the success of a Youth Development approach are your beliefs, values, and attitudes towards young people. Yet we live in an adult-dominated culture in which negative stereotypes of youth are so pervasive that we often aren't even aware of them. Regardless of what you may think you believe about young people, you can't help but lean towards the negative unless you actively and consciously make yourself aware of the effect an adult culture has on you.

The following 5 questions are designed to help you examine your own beliefs and attitudes. Asking yourself these questions periodically will help you to examine your behavior in relation to what you believe, or think you believe, about young people.



**RED
FLAG
#1**

Do you think that you have overcome your negative beliefs about young people and have no further need to examine your attitudes and values in this area?

Comments: At this point in history, achieving complete freedom from negative beliefs about young people is simply not realistic. Adults control the dominant culture and that culture is permeated with negative beliefs and stereotypes about our youth. Regardless of what you believe consciously, the dominant culture creates sub-conscious beliefs and values that you can't escape.

For example, when an adult is treated with disrespect, condescended to, patronized, or not given a chance to show what they can do before someone takes responsibility from them, it is common to hear the statement 'stop treating me like a child.' When hearing that statement most of us don't react -- it is simply accepted. But, just for a moment, change the statement. Say instead 'stop treating me like a Mexican' or 'stop treating me like an African American.' I hope that you would never dream of making a statement like that, and that people would call you on it if you did. To make that statement would reveal your prejudice against a group of people, show how little faith you have in their capabilities, and how low you hold them in your esteem. So why do we feel comfortable making that statement about children?

Overcoming our prejudices against young people is an on-going struggle, and most of the culture that you live in will support your prejudice, not your struggle. If you ever get to the point where you think that you've got your attitude licked -- **RED FLAG** -- because it's simply not realistic.



**RED
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#2**

Do you experience young people in terms of their problems, deficits, or failure to live up to your expectations?

Comments: Check in with yourself at the end of the day. What was your experience of the young people you worked with? Are you aware of their problems, difficulties, and deficits? Are you frustrated and concerned because they are falling short of what you would like to see them achieve? Do you feel drained and overwhelmed from the challenges you faced with them?

Or, on the other hand, did you enjoy the time that you spent with them? Are you in awe of their energy, creativity, and humor? Do you feel refreshed and vitalized from the experiences you shared?

In every interaction you have with young people (or any age person, for that matter) there will be peaks and valleys, positives and negatives, joys and sorrows. The question to ask yourself is; which side did you experience? If you find that you experience the deficits to a greater degree than the assets -- **RED FLAG**. The assets are there, too -- if you're looking for them.



**RED
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#3**

When you speak about young people, do you use more negative descriptors than positive ones?

Comments: Listen to yourself as you speak about the young people you work with. Are you using terms like manipulative, resistant, and aggressive? Or are you instead using terms such as resourceful, independent, and assertive? Note that these very different terms can be describing the same observable behaviors. Young people trying to meet their needs by working available systems may be described as manipulative or resourceful. They don't like the case plan you've designed? That could mean that they're resistant or independent. They get in your face if they don't like the way they're being treated? Does that make them aggressive or assertive?

Pay attention to the way you identify behaviors. If you find that you are more likely to use a negative label than the corresponding positive one -- **RED FLAG** -- because almost any behavior can be interpreted as a negative or a positive, depending on what beliefs and values you hold related to young people.



**RED
FLAG
#4**

Are you unaware of other's use of negative descriptors when they speak of young people?

Comments: Listen to others as they speak about young people. This is the other side of **RED FLAG #3**, because others have the choice between negative interpretations of behavior and positive ones, just as you do. The question to ask yourself in this case, however, is; when you hear negative descriptors of young people, do you really hear them? Are you aware that they may be unfairly judging the behavior of the young people being discussed, or are you unaware that you may be listening to a jaded perception?

I've had the experience of walking out of a meeting frustrated by the way young people were discussed. Yet when I spoke about it with my co-worker who had attended the same meeting they didn't seem to have noticed that virtually every descriptor used was a negative one.

This is a tough one because you have to notice that you're not noticing. But if you are able to notice that you are not noticing -- **RED FLAG** -- it may be time to increase your awareness.



**RED
FLAG
#5**

Do you leave negative statements or stereotypes about young people unchallenged, or find yourself participating in humor and negative stereotyping at the expense of young people?

Comments: Even if you are aware of it when other people make negative statements or stereotype young people, if you don't challenge what you hear, you are, by default, perpetuating the problem. Consider whether or not you would be comfortable sitting in a meeting where your colleagues are being racist, sexist, or homophobic -- even in a mild form or light-hearted manner. If you would not be comfortable in that situation, if you would feel a need to speak up and let them know that their attitude is not acceptable to you -- then why would you accept less of yourself as an advocate for youth?

And you certainly would not participate in it. So why would you join in joking or stereotyping at a young person's expense? Granted, there are appropriate times when humor can be a release, but far too often we allow ourselves to participate in conversations such as these at times that may not be appropriate. This is an issue for supervisors to take note of. If you observe one of your staff joining with the crowd when young people are being disparaged it may be something that you will want to discuss with them.

When you are around people who are voicing negative beliefs about young people you should be uncomfortable, you should challenge their beliefs, and you should -- above all -- not participate yourself. If you notice that this is not what you do -- **RED FLAG** -- because if you are not an active agent of change, you are simply another part of the problem.
