

Is it okay to dislike young people?

At their worst, young people remind us of ourselves

I have a confession.... Over the years, I've disliked some of the young people I've worked with. Some have been arrogant. Some have been willfully destructive. Some have shown no remorse for the things they've done. Sometimes, admittedly, my dislike has been retaliatory. Because they haven't liked me, I've made it my business not to like them. Childish stuff. But often there's been more to it than that. Often the young people have seemed to like me well enough: they've been on time for our meetings; they've been happy to talk and happy to come back again. And yet....

Why is it so shameful to admit that we don't like a young person? Is it because young people are young and therefore don't deserve to be disliked? Is it because they can't help being the way they are? Like most professionals, I pride myself on liking young people. I'm not scared of them. I enjoy their company. I take as much trouble with the inarticulate and slow-witted as I do with the emotionally fluent and funny. And liking young people is important. It's something they pick up on and remember long after the relationship has ended. So when I find myself disliking a young person, it disturbs my equilibrium, my professional self-regard, my sense of who and how I'm supposed to be.

What goes on? Is it that young people confront us with our younger selves as they sit there: spotty, uncomfortable in their own skin, dirty, sweaty, overweight sometimes with awkward hairstyles and ill-judged clothes? How much, I wonder, do they remind us of our shadowy, adolescent selves? Of those disavowed parts of ourselves? If we keep a place in our psyche where we deposit and keep hidden all the unacceptable parts of ourselves: our envy and fear, our vengeful feelings, our sexual chaos, our despair and hatred, our competitiveness.... And if we grow into adults wanting to believe that these parts no longer exist, that we've completely exorcised them, then to what extent are we confronted by them all over again in young people and thrown into confusion, reminded of the very things we were trying so hard to forget? Does the strength of our dislike of a young person indicate the strength of whatever we're denying in ourselves?

The danger of not acknowledging the dislike that we inevitably feel towards some young people is that we enter into false alliances with them, pretending that everything's okay until - eventually and inevitably - it isn't. I sometimes wonder whether young people unconsciously present us with the dislikeable parts of themselves as a challenge. Finding themselves full of hatred, jealousy, spite and other human emotions, I wonder whether they're effectively saying to us, "When I'm such an awful person inside, why would you want to love me or even *like* me?" Perhaps our dislike confirms what the young person's always thought, "Yes, you're right, I am dislikeable, because if you got to know me, if you got to know what I'm *really* like, then you'd certainly find me dislikeable!" Young people sometimes hide all the attractive, likeable, lovable parts of themselves as way of protecting these good parts from contamination by any bad parts. Sometimes they hide the good parts as a kind of self-punishment.

Is it okay to dislike young people?

At their worst, young people remind us of ourselves

How to move forward? What if young people can't forgive themselves for being dislikeable until other people have forgiven them? And what if that can't happen until these other people (people like me) have first acknowledged and forgiven the dislikeable parts of themselves?

So many young people are battered and bruised by life. Sometimes they do bad things. When they discover in other people's eyes not horror and despair but admiration and delight (despite all the bad things they may have done), change becomes possible. But it's impossible to see past a young person's misdeeds unless we first acknowledge our own capacity to be cruel as well as kind, to be racist, abusive, arrogant, vindictive, violent, murderous. I'm not suggesting that we should excuse or ignore young people's misdeeds but that we should understand young people as flawed human beings like the rest of us. Once upon a time, these apparently dislikeable young people were newborn babies with no conscious plans to inflict pain on anyone.