

I'm not a child anymore!

Young people will enact their distress until they're taken seriously

“I’ve been self-harming! I think I might be depressed! I think I’m suffering from anxiety!” In some schools and in some families, the only way to get heard is to shout loudly. And when shouting loudly doesn’t work, things have to be escalated: whatever it takes to get other people’s attention, to be taken seriously. Pity the poor young person suffering in silence, getting on with her schoolwork and containing her distress, because her chances of ever being heard are negligible in a school where the message has gone out that busy professionals will only take you seriously if you can somehow *prove* your need, if you can *demonstrate* your distress.

Getting other people to take us seriously is one of the developmental tasks of adolescence as we separate from our parents, striving to become autonomous people deserving of respect, no longer children but young people with opinions, with interesting experiences to share. It’s infuriating and can feel crushing to be patronized, so unless adults are prepared to take them seriously, young people are obliged to demonstrate ever more extreme behaviour if that’s what it takes to get adults to wake up and listen.

However they set about doing it, young people have to communicate and adults have to understand the fact that, for the most part, adolescence really is painful with all sorts of primitive infantile anxieties re-awakened: anxieties about separation, identity, agency; anxieties about being worth anything. Adults have to understand that, far from being the best days of our lives, schooldays are difficult: they’re long and tiring, demanding on so many levels. And bad things really do happen: young people fail; they get humiliated, bullied; their relationships break up; they get hurt.... Adults have to understand that young people are inconsistent, not least because their brains are going through huge changes, adapting to new experiences and challenges. They have to understand that this doesn’t make young people silly. It might make them seem mad, however “I am but mad north-north-west,” observes Hamlet. “When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.” In other words, “I may appear mad; I may behave madly, but don’t be fooled: behind the façade, I’m deadly serious. I can see through your pretence. I’m not stupid.”

Of course, taking young people seriously doesn’t mean indulging their every whim; it doesn’t mean colluding with their catastrophising tendencies. Adults have valuable, experienced perspectives to offer. But young people will only listen to those perspectives if they feel that they themselves are being taken seriously in the first place. Adolescence has never happened to adolescents before. They’ve never had to take important exams before; they’ve never broken up with a lover before; they’ve never been sexually capable before; some may have had no experience of failure in their lives before now. Adult advice is only helpful, only worth listening to, if it first acknowledges the visceral quality of a young person’s experience, taking it seriously before trying to take away some of its sting. “I’ve been self-harming! I think I might be depressed! I think I’m suffering from anxiety!” Sometimes these are simply ways of saying, “I’m not a child any more. Start taking me seriously!”