

CHILDISM

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Confronting Prejudice
Against Children

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl

Yale

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For Ava, Daphne, and Walt, the under-fives in our family,
and their contemporaries everywhere; may we all act in
their best interests, and may they, in turn, being well cared
for, act in the best interests of the world they share

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Introduction

What's in a Word?

THERE WILL ALWAYS BE INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES that turn against their children, breaking the natural order Aristotle described two and half millennia ago in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (8.11.2): “The parent gives the child the greatest gifts, its existence, but also cherishment and education [*kai trophes kai paideias*]; . . . and because the child receives, it owes the parent honor and helpfulness.” People as individuals and in societies mistreat children in order to fulfill certain needs through them, to project internal conflicts and self-hatreds outward, or to assert themselves when they feel their authority has been questioned. But regardless of their individual motivations, they all rely upon a societal prejudice against children to justify themselves and legitimate their behavior.

We are accustomed to thinking in terms of prejudice against women, against people of color, against other groups that are “targets of prejudice,” as we call them, in Western society, and we accept the idea that struggles against sexism and racism have been going on since the eighteenth century and will have to keep going on if these prejudices are ever to

be overcome. But prejudice against children? Who even acknowledges its existence?

Let me give you an example of American society's prejudice against children—the subject of this book—and ask you to think about it. The example is a fact, a shameful fact: America incarcerates more of its children than any country in the world. Half a million American children are currently in juvenile detention centers (juvies), where many of them are victims of abuse and neglect, as many of them were victims of abuse and neglect before they arrived. Some of the “delinquents” are there because they were arrested for a crime and are awaiting trial. They will be tried in courts that are permitted to sentence children convicted of homicide to life *without parole* in adult prisons. Until a recent Supreme Court decision, the courts could have sentenced them to death. Others were incarcerated without arrest: they were simply found on the streets, sometimes homeless, sometimes mentally ill, and judged to be out of control and dangerous “to themselves and others.” No one knew what else to do with them.

America also incarcerates a higher proportion of its adult population than any other country in the world—a fact that is directly related to the one about child incarceration. Many children who have spent years of their lives in and out of juvie will join the adult prison population, which has increased sevenfold since 1970, and has now reached over two million inmates. Prison-building is one of the nation's fastest-growing industries.

Although a movement is now afoot to do something about the escalating child-incarceration rate, it is not framed as a struggle to overcome prejudice against children. Far from it. In 2010, for example, a Juvenile Justice Department task force recommended that the State of New York support community-based “alternatives-to-detention programs” that

might decrease the number of young people who were, in effect, being sentenced to life imprisonment. The governor ignored this recommendation when creating his budget. An editorial in the *New York Times* (Feb. 19, 2010) criticizing the governor summarized the report, emphasizing that “the report also found that judges often sent children to [detention] facilities—often hundreds of miles away from home—because local communities lacked the means to help them with mental problems or family issues. These are costly decisions, both in the emotional toll they take on children and the financial toll they take on taxpayers. To institutionalize one child for a single year, the state can spend as much as \$200,000.”

The *Times* was certainly right to stress that means should be found to support local therapeutic programs and prevent the “costly decisions” being made by judges. But what about the motive and rationale for building those detention homes in the first place? Why was it ever considered a good idea to put a child in a prisonlike facility? Why was it not considered abusive to imprison a child? And wouldn’t the effect of such abuse take more than an “emotional toll” on the child? Yet the United States tolerated and even encouraged such policies toward children even as the rest of the world—192 countries—ratified the 1989 U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, in which child imprisonment is forbidden. (Somalia, which has not had a legitimate government since 1989, is the only other country that hasn’t signed.)

It is the questions about adult motives and justifications that were *not* raised by the *Times* that point to American society’s prejudice against children: in this case, the idea that troubled children and youths should be removed from sight. The beliefs that children are dangerous and burdensome to society and that childhood is a time when discipline is the paramount adult responsibility reflect this prejudice. A

view is anti-child that considers adult authority over children absolute, to the point of life and death. But we have no generally accepted term for such a prejudice, nothing comparable to *racism*, another societal prejudice, and one that helps explain why African Americans, particularly young males, make up a disproportionate percentage of the population of juvenile detention centers and adult prisons.

My first task in this book, then, is to make that word, the term whose definition is “prejudice against children,” a part of our vocabulary and to provide a nuanced, comprehensive definition of it. My aim is to enable us, Americans and others, to move beyond editorializing over how much the care for “antisocial” children costs, and to start thinking about the huge range of anti-child social policies and individual behaviors directed against all children daily. The word I propose is *childism*, and its definition is the subject of this book.

I anticipate your skepticism: why do we need another word, another “ism”? The initial task for anyone who wishes to make *childism* part of our lexicon is to take your doubts seriously. We do not need more useless social science verbiage. Nor do we need to identify new social problems; we have plenty already. So a definition of childism must also anticipate a reaction against the very idea of prejudice against children. That reaction was the standard response when the word *childism* was coined in 1970. Isn’t it obvious, skeptics argued then, that adults love their children and want to make the world better for them? Even if they come up with mistaken policies for dealing with children, adults are not *against children*. Not children *as a group*.

When childism pervades a society, however, even people who genuinely want to make the world better for children may find it hard to realize that it exists. Many in the eighteenth century found the idea difficult to imagine when the

word *misopedia*, “hatred of children,” was coined (on the model of other Greek-derived group-hatred words—*misanthropy*, *misandry*, *misogyny*—most of which are still used). *Misopedia* fell out of use in the nineteenth century, even though writers like Charles Dickens were describing in graphic terms the persecution suffered by real-life Oliver Twists and David Copperfields throughout Britain. There was no need for *misopedia*, harrumphed skeptics, in a world that was becoming ever more child-centered. To the nineteenth-century social reformers engaged in “child-saving” through the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, only bad children were to be hated—and deservedly so. Good children were the adored and treasured possessions of good, loving adults.

But as Dickens knew, there was a flaw in the arguments of the child-savers: children were being seen as possessions that served adult needs the way gadgets and animals do, the way slaves and servants do, the way any group construed as “naturally” subservient does. Treating a child as a possession was not philopedic. In today’s society, the word *childism* might do what *misopedia* could not: highlight the fact that prejudice is built into the very way children are imagined. Unlike *misopedia*, *childism* does not reference the older “mis-” words of group *hate*; rather, it invokes contemporary words for prejudices—*racism*, *anti-Semitism*, *sexism*—each of which refers specifically to the idea of treating a group of people as a possession and *legitimizing* their servitude with an idea, an “ism.” People do not always hate those they subordinate; but those they subordinate with an “ism,” a prejudicial *political* ideology, they cannot love.

But childism differs crucially from other ism prejudices named in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because, although many features of the phenomenon have been explored, it has not been studied thoroughly *as a*

prejudice. The word is not in our political discourse or our dictionaries, and no subfield of Prejudice Studies has been dedicated to childism. Nor is there a discipline dedicated to childism within the relatively new field of Children's Studies, which dates only from 1990. But such a focus could guide experts' explorations of how and why adults fail to meet children's needs or respect their rights; why children deemed antisocial are imprisoned (and how such designations are determined); why children remain in poverty; why adults feel justified in attacking children; and, in general, why American society fails to support the development and well-being of its children. Because we do not look for an underlying social cause when adults fail to cherish their children or meet their developmental needs, little effort has been made to combat what I argue is a prejudice that rationalizes and legitimates the maltreatment of children.

Since the mid-twentieth century, social scientists have been exploring the many reasons why individual adults harm individual children, but they have not looked at the wider picture of how harm to children is rationalized, normalized. Prejudice against children is not the sole or the immediate cause of child maltreatment, but it is the *conditio sine qua non*, and we need to understand its various features if we wish to uncover the specific causes of maltreatment in any given instance.

Why have we refused to recognize prejudice against children as a prejudice; why have we refused to name that prejudice as we have named other prejudices—racism, sexism, ageism? Consider the word *sexism*, which dates from 1965. Its usage enabled us to understand many phenomena—sexual harassment, unequal pay for women, gender-biased language, patriarchal property and divorce codes, pseudoscientific conclusions about femaleness, domestic violence, sex-

ual trafficking—as manifestations of a way of imagining or stereotyping women in order to justify treating them differently from men. These phenomena are all behaviors or institutions that work against women, and all have been justified as acceptable or normal or natural by sexism—that is, by attitudes and belief systems that are prejudiced against women.

The word *childism* could similarly guide us to an understanding of various behaviors and acts against children as instances of stereotyping children and childhood. We could recognize the many social and political arrangements that are detrimental to children or that fail to meet their needs—the many anti-child trends in every aspect of our society, from legal structures to cultural productions—as instances of adult behavior toward children that is rationalized or justified by a prejudice. *Childism* could help identify as related issues child imprisonment, child exploitation and abuse, substandard schooling, high infant mortality rates, fetal alcohol syndrome, the reckless prescription of antipsychotic drugs to children, child pornography, and all other behaviors or policies that are not in the best interests of children. The behavior of adults who are childist—most of whom are *parents*—harms directly or indirectly the huge human population under the age of eighteen, which is now close to a third of the population worldwide, and in some places more than half.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the word *racism* began to replace *racialism* and *colorism*. It came into use after the Emancipation Proclamation, after the Civil War, and after the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution had enfranchised former slaves. While a political victory had been won, many African Americans recognized and decried the racism that remained, deeply entrenched, in the social and political life of the nation. It remains still. *Sexism*, too, appeared at a moment when women whose grand-

mothers had won the right to vote in the United States and in other nations were struggling to find the promised equality in private as well as public life. They realized that they were up against something—or something was up against them—for which they did not have a name. Something more complex than “misogyny” was relegating them to the position of “the second sex.” The existing understanding of prejudice against women, they realized, was neither comprehensive nor psychologically deep; it lacked a philosophical *Kritik*, or questioning of premises, and thus had in many ways misconceptualized the phenomenon. These women’s courageous rethinking of the prejudice against their sex led to Women’s Studies programs and Second Wave feminist theorizing, and these, in turn, led to efforts to combat this prejudice that spread to include every realm of culture and every region of the world. These efforts continue today.

I am not proposing that we adopt the word *childism* in order to launch an inquiry into prejudice against children. In diverse areas of science and social science, social policy, and child advocacy that inquiry already exists, without the word, or with out-of-focus words like *anti-youth racism*, *juvenile ageism*, *ephebophobia* (fear of adolescents), and *adultism* (indicating a prejudice in favor of adults). But the inquiry into prejudice against children—and these terms for it—have spurred no political consciousness and had no political meaning. What is needed now is a term that will have political resonance, something that can operate as *sexism* did to raise our political consciousness. To help those who have been pursuing inquiries into anti-child behavior formulate, unify, and report the results of their studies, *childism* can act as an umbrella concept, a heuristic, and a synthesizer, and it can function as a guide for political action. It can help researchers connect a lot of dots.

Just as important, acceptance of childism as both a word and a social reality could help us correct existing ill-conceived inquiries and misunderstandings. The matter is urgent, for on the basis of misguided and rigid theories we have put in place institutions and policies that harm children—that are, themselves, manifestations of childism. The legal phrase “in the best interests of children” has given guidance in the courts; it is now being applied to work for reform in policies affecting children, including child-imprisonment policies. But we need a word that applies across all facets of children’s lives, that reflects their experiences and what they themselves know about prejudice.

The moment is overdue for adults to rethink and reform their attitudes toward children. Giving children the vote, or encouraging them to take part in the political process, both avenues for combating prejudice against women and persons of color, will not work for children. A brief, wrong-headed, adult-led “children’s liberation movement” in the early 1970s did try to position children as political actors—even as voters with voting rights. But this was sheer patronization and quickly became part of the problem of childism, not part of its solution. Unlike any other group that has been targeted with prejudice, children cannot be direct political actors, although they should be educated to become political actors, thinking and acting for themselves, individually and in concert. But while children are learning to become political participants, adults need to consult them about their needs and to represent them in the political arena.

A beginning has already been made. Two remarkable U.N. documents, drafted by adults, acknowledge that children have basic human and political rights. The first, the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, published in 1959,

was reinforced in 1989 by the second, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was the result of thirty years of scientific and political explorations into how best to implement and enforce the Declaration. Not coincidentally, over those thirty years a reliable science of child development emerged for the first time in history. Child Development as a field can reinforce the international political work of adults who are determined to create a better world for *all* children.

The Declaration begins with the forthright announcement that children have rights and that adults and governments have obligations to children. And it implies that those who have not met their obligations to children have justified their actions on the basis of a prejudice against children—first and foremost by their prejudicial assumption that children are possessions of adults and thus do *not* have rights. The Convention, building on these statements, lays out the kinds of obligations that adults have toward children, as well as the areas where they have failed to meet those obligations. The Preamble affirms both that children are “entitled to special care and assistance” and that what is “in the best interests of the child” should be a primary consideration in all questions concerning them. Its fifty-four articles promise what U.N. educational guides for young people call the 3 Ps: Provision, Protection, and Participation.

The signatory nations—more than have ever signed a U.N. convention—committed themselves to developing programs in these “3 Ps” and reporting their progress biannually to an international oversight committee and to UNICEF. Their common goals are reducing and eventually ending child poverty and providing every child with the means and education to develop healthily and freely; protecting children from exploitation, abuse, and neglect; and promoting children’s participation in familial and communal life “to the ex-

tent of their evolving abilities.” The promise of the third P, participation, is truly revolutionary. And it has provoked enormous counterrevolutionary opposition, especially from adults who believe that children belong to their families, their governments, or religious institutions or corporations that act as proxies for families or governments.

The U.N. documents, though crucial first steps, are only the opening statements in a conversation that must be ongoing and that needs to address questions that neither the Declaration nor the Convention was designed to raise, for it is the answers to these questions that will help us understand what keeps parents and governments from fulfilling their acknowledged obligations to their children. We need now to turn to what motivates childism in individuals and groups and what conditions most foster, or hinder, childism in societies. We must seek the underlying motive that helps explain why many adults do deny that children have rights; why they refuse to provision, protect, or encourage the participation of their children in family and community affairs; and why they discriminate against their young—the future of their societies—in order to favor not just themselves but adults generally.

It is important to recognize that the answers to these questions will not uncover the specific cause of any individual case of child abuse, but they will help us understand what the abusing adult believed and how he or she justified the abuse. Until recently researchers in various disciplines have explored specific motivations and legitimating motivations without attempting to distinguish between the two, and this has meant that their efforts lack a coherent vision; they have not been systematized or summarized. Without such a vision, it has been difficult for researchers to present the results of their work in a way that has theoretical, practical, or educational value. But first steps toward such a vision have

been taken by the Swedes, for example, who spearheaded the U.N. Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, based on achievements in their own country, where corporal punishment was made illegal in 1969. Swedish researchers have investigated the beneficial effects of their law and the parent-education campaign that accompanied it. Both parenting practices and parental attitudes toward children have radically improved in Sweden. But this is a rare case in which researchers both investigated the issue as a societal problem, rather than an individual one, and considered the problem from the point of view of the children.

How might we go about listening to the victims of childism as researchers looking into racism, sexism, and homophobia learned to listen to the victims of those prejudices—including themselves? By consulting children and considering their viewpoints, we can help them understand their own experiences and prepare them to participate in the struggle against childism and other prejudices. One approach is the psychoanalytic method that I use in my own practice: listening to patients tell their childhood stories in a consulting room. Combined with the science of Child Development, this methodology can help illuminate the basic forms childism takes and how those forms manifest themselves in childist actions, policies, and institutions.

The psychoanalytic tradition has contributed the key reflection on how to listen to children and theorize for their social benefit on the basis of what they say. My touchstone text is a trilogy collected under the title *In the Best Interests of the Child*, which the child psychoanalyst Anna Freud began to publish in the 1970s with her colleagues Albert Solnit of the Yale Child Study Center and Joseph Goldstein of the Yale Law School. The audience for their work was the legal profession—particularly judges in family courts—but their

insights into how to see children's issues from a child's viewpoint can be applied more broadly.

In the Best Interests of the Child has had a dramatic effect on American legal work involving children and children's rights. Following several key progressive Supreme Court decisions, it helped spur the field of Child Advocacy. Yet despite these advances, since the 1970s childism has grown more intense in other arenas in America, with disastrous consequences for American children. In this book I examine that forty-year-long story as itself a case study: a case study in American childism.

By examining this period of American history as a case study, we can explore at a societal and political level the reasons behind the increase (and occasional decrease) in childist attitudes and policies. This is something that children themselves cannot usually tell us about; their insight is at the micro-level of their families and their individual experiences. Our task is to apply theoretical concepts, analysis, and history to their insights in order to broaden our inquiry to the macro-level of social attitudes, legislation, and policy. For this, we need to examine their parents, who were and are at the center of the case study. This generation of parents—my own generation, the post–World War II Baby Boomers, now in their sixties—became in the 1970s deeply conflicted in relation to their children, as well as to the future more generally, with progressive and regressive tendencies waging a constant battle. The widely used phrase “culture wars” hardly does justice to the confusion and malaise that have permeated America from those years forward.

Many of this generation came to adulthood as vocal opponents of contemporary forms of racism and sexism, and they devoted vast energy to improving the study, discussion, and policies directed at both those prejudices, with varying

degrees of success and subject to varying degrees of backlash. But most of them ignored the childism that surrounded their own children, born in the 1970s, and that sometimes pervaded their own homes. Further, over time the majority of this generation (including both conservatives and liberals) became, for complex reasons, childist. The clearest sign of this was the widespread acquiescence in policies that required future generations to shoulder responsibility for present prosperity and present endeavors; that gave less attention to supporting healthy child development than to U.S. political dominance and economic growth. The young have been saddled with a world filled with violence, riddled with economic inequality, and endangered by a disastrous lack of environmental oversight; they must assume a gigantic burden of peacekeeping, legislating fairness, and halting environmental degradation.

Even as their children's future was being mortgaged, some in the Baby Boomer generation were fighting to protect it, forming child-advocacy organizations like the Children's Defense Fund (CDF). Since the 1970s, the CDF has kept statistics on the harm being done America's children. Consider the chilling numbers in the 2009 summary report that preceded the present economic crisis:

Today, 14.1 million children in America, or 1 in 5, are poor, the majority living in working families. . . . Almost 900,000 children each year in America are abused or neglected, one every 36 seconds. Forty percent of these children get no services at all after the initial investigation. Each year, more than 800,000 children spend time in foster care. . . . On any given night, 200,000 children are homeless. . . . Using the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [it can be reported that] 3,184 children and teens were killed by firearms in 2006, a 6 percent increase from

the previous year. . . . The U.S. has the sixth lowest high school graduation rate among the 30 industrialized countries that are OECD members.

But the child advocates, supporters of the 1960s Great Society initiatives to help children, could not stop or even slow the anti-child trend that began during Richard Nixon's presidency, was normalized during the Reagan years, continued during the Clinton years, and escalated dramatically during the George W. Bush administration. So strong has been the anti-child trend that every U.S. Congress since 1989 has refused to ratify the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, the international community's pioneering effort to hold adults accountable for the well-being of their young.

In this American story, the first group of victims—children denigrated as they reached adolescence with the title Generation X—were cast by childist policy decisions into increasingly unequal groups: the well off and the poor, the abused and the not-abused. Such divisions, especially the less well-known one between those who were abused and those who were not, made it almost impossible for policy makers and the general public to recognize the diverse motives of child maltreatment. It also practically closed off any consideration of what maltreatment feels like to children, who experience it as running on a continuum from they-love-me to they-love-me-not. From the children's point of view, it is their parents' and caretakers' *attitudes* toward them that matter most. When childism is prevalent in a society *all* children are hurt, not just those classified as "the abused."

Both these groupings had terrible effects on children as well as on the understanding of children (including inquiry into childism). Many within the growing ranks of child advocates, teachers, family lawyers, and pediatricians who

cared for children outside their homes could see these ill effects accumulating. And since the early 1970s, they have studied some American children as victims of “child abuse and neglect,” and they have made efforts to protect this group. These children—“the abused”—became the concern of a new field of study, Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN), which emerged at this time. But abused and neglected children have been ill served by the way they were classified, studied, and interpreted historically, and by the influence such studies have had on legislation, policies, and programs, including child-protective services. Although analysts, who work with children psychotherapeutically, have begun to recognize not only that childism exists but that the keys to understanding and preventing it might lie in the knowledge children have of the motivations and circumstances of adults—if you want to know about sexism, ask a woman; if you want to know about childism, ask a child who has been granted a safe and supportive setting in which to talk—most child advocates have focused narrowly and wrongly on protecting individual children from child abuse. This focus narrows the idea of children’s basic rights to simply Protection and so does little or nothing to help the nation’s children as a group. Indeed, by every measure of Provision, Protection, and Participation promised in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the condition of America’s children as a group has deteriorated over the past forty years, particularly among the poor and the abused. On UNICEF’s measures of child well-being, recent reports rank the United States lowest among first-world nations. America has the highest rates of child abuse in the world.

The situation is not likely to improve as America deals with a new economic crisis. Further escalation in childism is likely unless the new leadership generation acknowledges

that prejudice against children is a social reality as well as a feature of individual psychology and pathology. This new generation includes women and men who were inspired by the many nonviolent youth-led revolutions that have taken place around the world since the Berlin Wall was pulled down and the Soviet Union collapsed. The revolutionary young are now of an age to recognize that they have participation rights (and have always had those rights), and that only participation will help them prepare to exercise their rights as citizens.

The new leadership generation must be able to grasp the meaning of these post-1989 revolutions as well as heed the hopes for a new beginning that are coming from their own children and their children's advocates. Around the world, the young themselves are speaking up. They see the connection between political oppression and their hopes for the future. They see the connection between their own endangered future and that of the planet we all live on.

This book is intended as a working paper for all who are fighting the oppression of children, both those who recognize it as a result of prejudice and those who don't. It is my hope that through conceptual analysis, philology, history, literary analysis, political theory, and psychoanalytically informed therapy it can offer a manifesto on why we must—and how we can—combat this newest ism. The struggle against childism is one of the most important battles we will ever wage, for it is a fight for the future.

CHAPTER ONE

Anatomy of a Prejudice

IT SEEMS A VERY SIMPLE MATTER INTELLECTUALLY TO distinguish between acts that harm children or fail to meet their basic needs and the attitudes, ideas, or prejudices that rationalize such acts. Yet child-advocacy groups, Children's Studies, and the field of Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN) alike focus almost exclusively on the harmful actions, ignoring the even more harmful attitudes. Similarly, the lessons learned from studies of other victim groups that have helped analyze previously unacknowledged victim groups (as the racism model helped researchers understand sexism) have not been applied to children; the scientific field where these studies are gathered—today called Prejudice Studies—has no sub-field for children or the prejudice against them that can be named childism.

But we cannot understand the acts that harm children unless we understand the prejudices that underlie and, in the actors' minds, legitimate them. Before we turn to cases of children who have been the victims of harmful acts and rationalizing prejudice, then, we need to explore why Prejudice Studies, the home of research into racism, sexism, anti-

Semitism, and other isms, has no room in its house for childism. Many factors are involved, but key among them is the way childism differs from other prejudices.

Modern Prejudice Studies began after World War II as a field in which white people analyzed prejudice against blacks and men analyzed discrimination against women, marginalizing the voices of the victims. It evolved into a discipline in which the victims told their own stories, analyzed their own experiences, and created their own names to help them understand those experiences: racism, sexism, homophobia. Child advocates, working to protect children and formulate policies that protect children's rights, have not joined their work or children's voices to Prejudice Studies. Children and their advocates have not had the concept of childism to coordinate their thinking with the approaches developed within Prejudice Studies.

A key realization to understanding childism has been missing: the idea that children worldwide are a *target group*. A target group is one whose members share characteristics and conditions that those prejudiced against them seize on and distort for their own purposes. As a target group, children are comparable to women and people of color, to Jews and gays; but their group contains all the other target groups: young women and girls, children of color, Jewish children, gay children and the children of gays. Children have in common that they are all born dependent and relatively helpless. After birth they experience a period of developmental immaturity, to which different cultures assign different physical or biological and mental descriptions and phases, and to which different cultures give different endpoints (often puberty, when the children become sexually mature or capable of producing their own offspring).

But beyond these shared features, the biological group

comprising children is also subject to social, cultural, and political construction, evaluation, and distortion—the same kind of conceptualizing that Prejudice Studies identifies as central to the creation of every other target group. On a continuum, children are valued and loved at one extreme or they are not valued and not loved at the other. They are wanted or not wanted, adored or rejected, protected and provisioned or forced to fend for themselves. They are treated violently or wrapped in cotton wool. They are provided with the finest education available or allowed, even encouraged to become truants. Overall the continuum runs from love and nurturing all the way to negligence, hostility, and what has become classified as child abuse and neglect. Prejudice overtly rationalizes or justifies the behaviors at the negative end of the continuum, but it can subtly suffuse the positive behaviors as well, revealing their ambivalence or making them ambivalent.

The prevailing images or stereotypes of children that individual adults and societies use to rationalize their feelings toward them are, taken together, their childism. Consider the following sentiments, which are probably uttered every day without thought in the United States: “Kids are just wild unless you keep them in line, and that includes hitting them”; “If you don’t smack them, they don’t get tamed”; and the time-honored “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” These viewpoints are childist: they construct children as wild animals that should be physically controlled—they must be broken or they will not be obedient, useful possessions. The parent who hits a child in order to protect it from danger—to teach the child not to run into the road, for example, is doing something very different from the one who disciplines the child in order to break him or her; this discipline is rather a violent contest of wills, resembling the discipline that used to

be thought necessary for animal trainers or cowboys but is now recognized as brutality.

That prejudices operate by making a distinction between features a group actually shares and those that are attributed to it is by now common wisdom, and that understanding has made its way into contemporary dictionary definitions of the various prejudices, which are distillates of common wisdom. But dictionary definitions also reveal an area that has not been properly explored in Prejudice Studies—the various motivations of victimizers. Prejudice Studies has tended to treat all prejudiced people as having similar motivations, which are simply focused on different targets. This bias has made it difficult to look beneath the surface of a prejudice, the cliché level, into its motivational depths, where the negative and distorting evaluations originating in fantasies of target groups are rooted.

To come up with a working definition of childism that can point the way to an understanding of the origin and ongoing motivations of the prejudice, we need to look at how typical current definitions of prejudice avoid the territory of motivation in the same way that the field of Prejudice Studies generally does. Dictionary definitions routinely identify a target group and then gesture toward the grounds on which the target group has been *prejudged* (*prejudice* comes from the Latin *praejudicium*, “prejudgment”). But as the definitions approach the grounds of the prejudice, they often become circular, closing the door to deeper thinking with a cliché. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines *sexism* as “prejudice or discrimination, esp. against women, on the grounds of sex.” There is a wall of incomprehension and resistance in that “on the grounds of sex.” And it is just the wall that people hit when they try to analyze their own

prejudices, which they cannot see because they are looking at their prejudices through the lens of their prejudices. Prejudices are inherently self-justifying.

We can push against the wall by agreeing that, yes, a prejudice is a classification dividing people into groups and stereotyping them “on the grounds of” some feature—but that “on the grounds of” must be explored. It is the road leading to the classifier’s habits of thinking, speaking, and behaving that favor some people (and the traits and activities attributed to them) and condemn others. In the *OED*’s definition “on the grounds of sex” is really just a way of saying “on the grounds of their being women/men.” But if the definition read “on the grounds of *beliefs about the sexual differences and inequalities of people*, esp. females,” it would point readers in the direction of considering what purposes the prejudice sexism might serve.

Dictionary definitions of prejudices become circular when they build the prejudice they are defining into the definition. Nonetheless, by identifying the target group, they do at least identify the question: What is it that is being targeted about this group? What does the *sex* in “on the grounds of sex” refer to? And they do suggest that a prejudice is a belief, not a scientific or objective classification of a group, although prejudices can be presented as if they were science. Prejudices are not motivated by the desire that spurs genuine scientists: a desire to be as open-minded and inclusive as possible. Scientists seek theories that will explain the interrelatedness of all the elements that make up the universe—the whole cosmic ecology, as it were. (*Ecology* once referred to the study or science [-logia] of all living beings in their home or habitat [*oikos*], but it now refers also to the interrelatedness itself, the web of things and beings that create and live in the same habitat. The definition itself has opened out.)

By contrast, the narrow-minded purpose of a prejudice is to defend the prejudiced person (or group) by dividing, separating out, disconnecting, or privileging one part of the interrelated whole: one class of beings, one individual, one group. In the group sphere, it separates “we” from “them.” Prejudice defends “we” against a “them” that has been marked off as separate, other, not of the same family or ecosystem. Consider a cliché which is often used to explain sexism but which is itself an example of sexism: “Men are from Mars, women are from Venus.” Men and women are not of the same family; “where they are coming from” is different, and difference is destiny. This is like the older cliché “anatomy is destiny”—men and women have different futures based on their anatomical differences.

Prejudging subverts the frame of mind—the commitment to openness—in which scientific judging takes place, in which knowledge is a process, constantly subject to revision in the light of new knowledge. The development of knowledge is the basis of scientific judgment. When that development is disrupted by prejudices, the result is corrupt classifications, which fall short of the holistic, impartial developmental ideal. That ideal is hard enough to approach under the best circumstances because all searches are influenced by the subjectivity, partiality, and limitation of viewpoint and view of the searcher. But scientific minds are parts striving to investigate the whole of which they are parts. A mind, as Friedrich Nietzsche once observed when considering the place of science among the ancient Greeks, is “a microcosm swelling up to the macrocosm.”

Absence of defensiveness, too, is a scientific ideal that is never fully attainable. Prejudice corrupts understanding through a combination of partiality and defensiveness by setting up a hierarchy or a hierarchical binary “on the grounds

of X.” A prejudgment that one class of beings is privileged over another extends to the idea that the class is superior, and fit to rule or dominate over another (or even dominate over the whole ecology). The hierarchy asserted in childism is obvious: adults should rule over children; adults’ needs should be privileged over children’s needs. But “on the grounds of what” is not as obvious.

The European scientific tradition began with the works of Aristotle, and we can put the “on grounds of what” question to him. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he described the nurturing love and education (*kai trophes kai paideias*) a parent owes a child, Aristotle set out to define, as inclusively as possible, what *all* human beings have in common. Humans share a common desire to live together in a city-state (a *polis*), he noted, and to be happy (in a state of *eudaemonia*, “inner harmony”), while practicing virtue. Acknowledging that there are different human character types, each with a different guiding notion of how happiness is to be pursued and attained, Aristotle nonetheless kept in view as he classified the character types the unifying notion that all humans seek happiness and harmony, within themselves and in their relations with others.

A claim might have followed from this framework that all human beings are born *equally* desiring happiness in their relations with others—the philosophical assumption that began to appear consistently in post–World War II studies of children by child developmentalists and clinicians. But no such claim was made by Aristotle, whose excellent definition of the natural relation of children and parents is actually set in a childist frame. Aristotle first privileged one of his three character types, the contemplative man, over the other two (moralists and materialistic hedonists/proprietors), and then privileged one class of human beings, free male citizens of

the polis, over everyone else, including all women and children. Contemplative men were, asserted Aristotle, the most evolved in the spheres of character and political action.

So the classification, it turns out, was not universal: it did not include *all* men or women or children as those who were born seeking happiness. Slaves fell outside of the classification altogether, on the grounds that they were not free men or citizens. Stateless slaves were property. And women also fell outside of the classification on the grounds that they were inferior humans—colder, weaker, fitted primarily for bearing children, and lacking the reason possessed by citizens that could be exercised when they were acting within city-states. Women have virtues, said Aristotle, but not the higher, male virtues. Although he could eloquently describe a child's need for cherishing and education and a parent's natural responsibility to give that nurturing, children as such—and this is to the point of how to define *childism*—were omitted from Aristotle's characterology. This is because he thought of children politically as belonging to their male parent, just as slaves belonged to their masters, and he thought of them developmentally as similar to childbearing women, that is, without the reason needed to guide their search for happiness. Boys might become rational at age seven or so; girls never would.

Aristotle's assumptions about children—that they are possessions and lack reasoning ability—are childist. Nonetheless, they fit well with the common assumptions of the Greeks, and they were easily built into the European tradition after Aristotle, where they continued to intertwine with sexism and justifications of slavery (which eventually became racist). The idea that children are by nature meant to be owned by their male parent and that they lack reason has justified treating them like slaves and like immature, un-

formed persons without the active qualities, the developmental thrust, the proto-reasoning and choosing, and the individuality that contemporary developmentalists now recognize in them. These are the same qualities that the framers of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child saw in children when they included participation rights in accord with their evolving abilities as one of the 3 Ps.

The need that limits Aristotle's worldview is a desire for control and domination. Children are born wild and undomesticated and must be controlled, and women, as unreasoning beings, are not able to do this controlling. Women have wombs where children gestate, and they keep the households in which children continue to grow, but in those households men should be in charge of the male children's domestication, just as male citizens will later be in charge of their education. Not surprisingly, Aristotle also subscribed to a biological theory common among the Greeks that the conception of a child occurs when a male implants in a female's womb a seed, a *sperma*, that grows there for nine months. No ovum from the female is involved; she simply houses the tiny seed-being while it grows. A woman is like the soil in which an acorn grows to be an oak sapling.

The Greek theory of conception as a male act was eventually abandoned in the Western world. But the desire informing theories that deny the female contribution to reproduction, which is a desire to see men as responsible for reproduction, as well as for the cultivation or domestication of *their* seed, remains current in some quarters. It is still key to the prejudice sexism, as it is still involved in childism; and it also helps keep sexism and childism intertwined.

The desire behind the childist and sexist Greek theory of conception is not ancient history. The theory it underpins has been superseded, but the wish has not been abandoned.

You can see that desire at work now, for example, in the arguments of anti-abortionists, who claim that child ownership begins at the moment a sperm fertilizes an egg and there is “life” (a vague, polemical word in this context). Anti-abortionists insist, further, that decisions about the fertilized egg be made not by the women who gestate the child and give birth to it but by those who control the definition of *life*. In America today, a woman who judges that she physically cannot, or lacks the resources or feelings to, nurture a child she is carrying will find herself accused of being a child abuser. On roadsides all over the country and outside every abortion clinic, billboards and placards condemn “unborn child abuse.”

When anti-abortionists make their highly charged accusation that abortion is unborn child abuse, they are constructing themselves as the child-savers, and a mother who chooses not to carry a child to term as the child abuser or murderer, party to a physician-assisted infanticide. They seek to legislate who controls reproduction, who owns the unborn child, who defines *life*, and who defines *abuse*. They present the anti-abortion position as the only one that puts the welfare of the child first, that makes the best interests of the (unborn) child primary. But this assumes that “the best interests of the child” encompass nothing more than life—regardless of what sort of life it will be, or with whom, or how its life is viewed by the mother, without whom the unborn child cannot gestate. A conflict is set up between the anti-abortionists’ ownership claim to the unborn child and the claim that they try to impose on the mother: to be or not to be a child murderer.

I am not talking here about the ethics of abortion, only about how prejudice has dictated the public terms into which the abortion debate has become confined, so that the ethical issues are obscured in a power struggle. From this