



# Ending Ephebiphobia

*Young People Deserve More*  
Sarah Newton

# Ephiphobia — the “inaccurate, exaggerated and sensational characterisation of young people”

The stereotypes of young people and the irrational fear we have of them have no place in modern society. Pliny the Elder was on to something when he said, “What we do to our children, they will do to society.” If his words are to ring true, then we are in for a whole lot of trouble. And if we don’t counter the trend, our young people will increasingly lack the emotional resilience and social competence that is needed to make society a safe, fair, and happy place.

What we need is a model for empathetic behaviour when it comes to dealing with young people. A model that every adult can apply in every situation—be they a parent, an employer, a schoolteacher or a concerned citizen.

Isn’t it about time that, as a society, we stopped crushing the spirits of the next generation and started to understand their situations, feelings and motives and in turn change our own feelings, thoughts and attitude towards young people? This manifesto aims to bring together thought leaders and change makers in a common purpose to create a model of empathic behaviour that can be used in all our dealings with young people. This manifesto sets out my initial thoughts and is, in my mind, the beginning of a conversation, not the end. It is split into the seven mindset shifts that I believe need to occur for us to take an empathetic approach with our young people.

So join me and start a revolution on how we view, think, respond and act towards young people.

## Shift One: Quick fixes will not fix the problem.

So many of the problems with our young people are systemic and are created by a multitude of circumstances and situations. Some developed over years, some decades and some much further than that. Yet we think that a quick intervention will “fix them”. We see a problem and we rush to fix the young person with a quick solution.

People and situations are so much more complicated than “quick fixes”.

The first questions we need to ask is actually does that young person need fixing. In fact, what gives us the right to say anyone needs fixing?

If we want to improve the situation, then we must realise that it may take as long to improve as it did to break down in the first place.

People only change when they are ready to, and most of the time this is not quick!

Our young people are not appliances, something cannot just break and you call in someone to repair it. It is like any exercise programme; it is painful, sometimes goes off track, you can go for ages without seeing results and it takes time to achieve your outcome.

A lot of these quick fix methods assume that we can control another, force them into change and, most importantly, they look only at one aspect of the problem, quite often ignoring important aspect such as environment, diet, societal expectations, cultural legacy and development.

I can work with a young person and do everything and really change their view on life, their attitude and behaviour, but if that young person sits on the couch all day eating chocolate, the improvement in their behaviour will be minute.

We need to be brave and really take these problems by the horns, implementing long-term solutions that take an integrated approach to supporting our young people. We need to ask bigger questions when we deal with problems surrounding young people. Questions that go beyond what's wrong and how we can fix it to what has caused this to be such a problem and how can we make sure it never happens again.

Long-term, far reaching solutions that integrate all the different aspects to produce long-term success should be our only option.

## **Shift Two:** Make young people part of the solution rather than making them a problem that must be dealt with.

I believe that we must make young people part of any solution.

There are so many interventions at the moment that do something to our young people rather than with them. The problems we have with our young people in society will not be solved by us, the adults. How can we solve something that we know nothing about ourselves?

No amount of research and statistics can really tell us what it is like to be in their shoes. If we want to make society a better place for them, we need to make young people part of the solution and not part of the problem. They need to be engaged, consulted and included in any decisions that are made about them.

Participation is the key to societal change. Only through participation will we get a very clear understanding of the challenges and problems and be able to support young people to go about finding their own solutions. Only through participation will we give youth the authority, agency and ability to feel and be empowered to create change in themselves.

## Shift Three: Engage young people from their point of view rather than getting them to see things my way.

To engage with the next generation, we must meet them where they are at, not where we are. When we reach out to young people to connect and engage them we cannot do this from our place, as an adult, by looking at what we would want or what is important to us. We cannot and must not try to make the young person fit into our view of the world. We must, to effect any change, embrace this generation and connect with them from there.

We must stop seeing the Internet and social media, pop culture, etc. as an evil. We must delve into their world feet first and look at the world from their point of view. Parents, employers and the education system need to learn how to embrace YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc. and use them to reach out to people who can otherwise seem unreachable.

We must look at the lyrics of modern music and glean from it what we can when it comes to the thoughts and feelings of our children. We must stop making them wrong for all they do and for what they believe and start to work with them from that point of view.

Only through participation will we give youth the authority, agency and ability to feel and be empowered to create change in themselves.

## Shift Four: Concentrate on the relationship with the young person over any measurement, behavior or result.

I believe that relationships are the key to any long-lasting change. If we want to influence and impact the next generation, then we must ensure that we build our relationships with them over anything else.

It is so easy for us to focus on measurement, behavior and attitude. So easy for us to look outside and blame a young person for a result that we find undesirable. It takes a strong, courageous person to look inside and say, "What am I doing that is not allowing this person to shine?"

Our interactions should not be based on how to get this person to do what you want but by asking whether what you are about to do is going to harm or damage the relationship.

To influence a young person, we must be in what is known as a sphere of influence. As a teacher, a parent or employer, we need to be in this sphere if we are to effect any change and support this young person to be who we know they can be. We can only do this if we have a strong relationship with them.

A strong relationship can do ten times more than any rewards or punishment can. Our relationship with them should be based upon seeing a real human being and all the potential within, not just what they do. We should see the qualities in them and not just the behaviour in front of us.

These relationships must be based on trust, understanding and equality.

So often, adult/young person relationships are based on the adult having power, no trust and little understanding. How can we expect our young people to grow up as conscious, giving citizens if we treat them with mistrust and contempt instead of empowering them with responsibility?

Change only happens when someone cares enough about themselves and others to want to change.

And that can only happen when we care about a young person more than they hate themselves. We show this by putting the relationship with them above all else.

Abolish petty grievances, minor conflict and selfish wants and needs. Bring an end to petty grievances and worn out, control-style methods that have for so long strangled our young people and choose above all a relationship with them, a relationship that will raise a socially conscious, responsible and independent new generation.

## **Shift Five:** Accept that conflict is inevitable, and always aim to reconcile rather than blame or punish.

We need to accept conflict as a part of life. So often, we try anything to avoid it or ensure it does not happen. I think that in order to move forward we need to accept that it is inevitable. Young people are, by their very nature, challenging. That is what helps society change. When we get different generations together with different ideals, conflict will happen. Get over it!

I think we shy away from conflict because we don't know what always know how to handle it, or we just don't want to make anyone feel bad. We want to remain in our comfort zones, and so often see conflict as negative We need to see that conflict can be very positive—it is a great chance to learn, grow and develop. Without conflict, we would never learn to change anything.

Conflict is merely someone saying to us that something is not working and we may need to try another way of doing it. It is not someone breaking the rules or insinuating that we are a bad parent, employer, teacher or anything else. It is merely a reflection that something needs to change.

Managing conflict is about repairing harm, not about winning! The best way to repair harm is through a collaborative process, including everyone involved instead of discipline by committee. When conflict with a young person happens, our aim should be to re-connect—whatever the situation.

We should:

- Aim not to blame or make the other wrong.
- Accept responsibility for harm we have caused and encourage them to do the same.
- Apologize for harm we may have caused and acknowledge the feelings of others.
- Look for beneficial solutions. We do not look for what we want and how to fix; we look for beneficial situations that will work for the whole.

## **Shift Six:** Problem solve with young people rather than establishing guilt or apportioning blame.

I believe that as adults we must take full responsibility for ourselves and our actions.

So often, we blame our young people for the state of the country, for the problems within our homes and schools. We try to change that behaviour with rewards, punishments and correction programs.

We rarely look at ourselves as the adults and take responsibility for the part we played.

As a parent, perhaps it is our reaction, as a teacher our need for compliance, as an employer our need for results that drive us to blame another rather than looking inwards and asking what we are responsible for.



As a society we are running around like headless chickens, trying to change our young people when the absolute truth is that the only person we have complete control over is ourselves. Think about it. Can anybody (without force) really control another's behavior? Can anyone really make you do something you do not want to? Could they do so when you were a teenager?

We need to see that conflict can be very positive—it is a great chance to learn, grow and develop.

We have no right to control another person through rewards, punishment, blaming and shaming them, and these practices will not produce long term success. We need to love rather than hate, be firm and compassionate instead of blaming and shaming and, above all, set clear agreements and boundaries in participation with the young people themselves.

We need to start doing this with them rather than to them.

**Shift Seven:** When things don't work out, tweak the system rather than blaming the young person.

People do not fail—systems fail.

I really believe that, when we see failure in our young people, it inevitably comes down to a weakness in a system—be it a school system, a family system or a societal system. As people we want to succeed and to succeed we need to find the right system and environment for us to do that.

Families argue because their communication and organizational systems could do with some work. Employees fail because the systems set up to monitor performance, train or recruit need some work. Students fail when they can't find their own way of studying because there is not a good system for applying relevance to their studies in place.

So many people I work with get so wrapped up in how that young person is making them feel rather than just looking at the facts of the situation and putting a system in place that better deals with those facts. In an organization, this might mean better training and a more effective performance management system. In families, this might mean more clear agreements, and for a student this could mean a more effective study plan.

Where you see failure, I urge you to think system failure—not people failure.

Remember, people do not want to fail; it is just that we have just not found the conditions/systems yet to help them succeed. After over fourteen years of working in this field, I have yet to find a situation that could not be made better by tweaking an existing system or putting a new one in place.

These systems may need to be tweaked, revamped and changed constantly and this is part of the process. Not everyone can fit into the same system and be successful. When things don't work out, tweak the system rather than blaming the young person.

I believe that this generation of young people are engaged, motivated and have so much to teach us. As David Cameron, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, has said, "The young people of this country are as passionate and idealistic as any generation before—perhaps more passionate." As a society we need to shift and change to accommodate and accompany them on their journey, not alienate them. We will not remedy anything by condemning it! **We can improve their lives only if we're actively engaged in them.** 📌

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Newton is an enthusiastic and passionate thought leader on all subjects that involve and revolve around youth and society. From her experience as a police officer in London to her controversial work with open family parenting, Sarah has an opinion about most things and is not afraid to speak up for what she thinks is right. Sarah has appeared on over 13 TV stations, 60 different radio stations and has received extensive newspaper and magazine coverage, with full-page features on her work in the *Independent*, the *Times*, the *Sunday Express*, the *Mirror* and the *Telegraph*. Sarah's passion is for empowering the next generation and she regularly writes about youth success, youth empowerment and how to impact the future leaders of tomorrow.

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