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SARAH OCKWELL-SMITH

Because I Said So!

Why society is childist and how breaking the cycle of discrimination towards children can change the world

PIATKUS

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First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Piatkus

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-349-43646-3

Typeset in Stone Serif by M Rules

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Papers used by Piatkus are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.

Piatkus
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

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What is Childism?

'Because I said so!'

How many times did you hear this phrase from your parents or carers when you were a child, having dared to question the wisdom of adult authority? I'd wager quite a lot. Maybe you were frequently ordered to 'just do as you're told!'? Or perhaps you remember hearing a countdown in stern tones: 'three ... two ... one'? Many of us will recall being scared into submission before the countdown was complete; others will remember being on the receiving end of a swift slap across the backs of our legs, or being dragged to sit in another room, alone, to think about our so-called disobedience and disrespect just a few moments after hearing the word 'zero'.

I have been working with parents, as an educator and coach, for the last two decades. When I ask them to remember times of disobedience from their own childhoods, the exercise is always met with chuckles, fond head shaking and misty-eyed reminiscence of good times, as they recollect a parent's or carer's words and actions. They believe that they deserved the so-called discipline. They tell me they were 'a right handful' or 'a naughty child'. They smile as they say, 'Ah, but it never did me any harm!'

They are wrong.

This mistreatment of children – the most vulnerable members of society – is neither funny nor just. The trouble is, it is ingrained into our society; it has become acceptable, advisable, even. We

celebrate leaving babies to cry alone at night in their cribs in the name of sleep training and 'teaching them to self-soothe', even though self-soothing at such a young age is developmentally impossible. We live in a world where people think nothing of isolating a child from their family and peers, shaming them, punishing them, and often reducing them to tears, in the name of entertainment for television shows and social media clips, all without the child's consent. Our governments seem hell-bent on making life as difficult as possible for families, and particularly for children, the only constituents who don't get a say in their futures. And we do all of this on the back of historical male child-care experts, who gave advice over a century ago, their theories buried deep in patriarchal beliefs.

We rarely question our thoughts, words and actions, and if we do, we brush aside any concerns on the basis that we think we turned out OK. Sometimes, when an argument seems sound and logic cannot be easily used to refute it, the messenger is ridiculed as a 'woke snowflake', 'liberal lefty' or worse. These personal attacks should be called out for their shaky philosophical basis, yet they are the mainstay of mainstream media today – and many people who follow it. We blindly perpetuate the discrimination of children and ridicule and ostracise those who attempt to stand up for them, in a pattern that continues from generation to generation.

What is childism?

Childism is no different from any other 'ism' – racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism (more commonly known as homophobia) and ableism. It simply refers to the discrimination of children in our society. You could argue that childism is a form of ageism, since ageism is usually defined as being treated unfairly, or discriminated against, because of age. The term ageism, however,

is usually used to refer to the middle-aged and elderly in society and doesn't address the unique barriers, discrimination and mistreatment faced by the young. Children are often believed to be spoiled rotten, showered with constant love, attention and money; therefore they cannot be discriminated against or poorly treated in the same way as older members of society.

The more books I write about parenting and childcare (this is my fourteenth), the more I realise that the answers to the questions I am most frequently asked (usually starting with 'How do I get my child to . . . ') should not be about changing the behaviour of children but, rather, about changing our beliefs and actions as adults. Because if adults truly understood childism and vowed to be better, and *do* better, as is the case with other 'isms', then the way we treat children would be radically different.

You may be surprised to learn that, as a mother of four and a so-called parenting expert, I am not a 'baby person' and I don't have a natural bond with children. In fact, aside from my own, I am often awkward around them, which is embarrassing when I chat with parents after a book signing, talk or workshop and a smiling baby is foisted into my arms for a quick photo. Given this lack of affinity with babies and children, I'm often asked why I do what I do? Why am I so doggedly determined to change the way children are viewed and treated? The truth is that my real passion is fighting injustice. I don't believe that children are treated fairly by society and yet they are the last discriminated group that we talk about. Children are discriminated against by adults from all walks of life – from parents and government officials to those who work in the education system: the very adults who are meant to protect and advocate for them. This needs to change.

What is the purpose of this book?

My aim with this book is threefold: first, to help you to understand your past and the childism you faced. To help you to see that the way you were treated as a child was often unjust and unfair and to reflect on whether this childist treatment has shaped your beliefs and behaviours. Next, I hope to help you consider the present and to see the extent of childism in society today, whether to help you to change the way you are with your children (or the children in your care) or perhaps, instead, to reinforce the approach you are already taking. Finally, we will look to the future and changes – some small, some big – that could transform the way our society treats children, with lasting positive effects for future generations.

Who is this book for?

In short, it's for everyone. We have all been affected by childism because we have all been children. Some will be drawn to this book for information to help them with parenting their own children, others will find the book validating and useful to help with understanding themselves and their own upbringings. I have also written the book with professionals in mind, including childcare workers, teachers, government employees and medical professionals who work with children and their carers. This is a book for every adult who cares about our world and its future.

While much of the book will focus on childism in the early years, with babies and toddlers, we will also look at how discrimination impacts older children – because childism doesn't stop as they get older, it just changes. To fully grasp the extent of childism in society today, though, we need to understand the roots of discrimination at the very beginning of childhood. The views and actions of adults towards infants shape the relationships and

treatment of children as they grow into tweens, teens and young adults. So, regardless of whether you have, or care for, a one-year-old, a ten-year-old or a seventeen-year-old, we must start at the very beginning to fully understand how children, whatever their age, are affected today.

What you will find in this book

In the following ten chapters, we will consider how childism impacts different areas of a child's life and highlight the discrimination. While this book is intended to raise awareness of an issue that has been ignored and avoided for far too long, it is also a rallying call to arms. Knowing about childism isn't enough; we need to do something about it. Therefore, Chapters 1–6 build the case against childism, while Chapters 7–10 introduce an action plan of ways to challenge it.

The first chapter in this book is one of two halves, starting with an introduction to who I am and why I have been drawn to this work, and, indeed, why you should trust me as your tour guide, and closing with an exploration of the laws in place that should, theoretically, protect children against discrimination, and how well they do their job. Chapter 2 turns back the clock, with a look at the history of childism and those who popularised the childist childcare techniques that are still commonly used by parents and carers today. In Chapters 3 and 4, we will look at sleep and discipline – two areas of child-raising that are arguably the most childist – and how their management is in direct conflict with child rights and needs. When children's needs for attachment, connection and validation are consistently unfulfilled as they grow, cycles of childism are perpetuated into the next generation. This is why it is so important to consider the impact of childism at such an early stage of childhood, regardless of how long ago we may have left that stage behind in our own lives.

We continue to build the case against childism in Chapter 5, this time turning our attention to our governments and politicians to consider what I term 'state-sponsored childism'; no book about childism would be complete without a section on childcare, education, mental-health support and the impact of putting profits before people. Moving on to Chapter 6, we will ask questions about children's right to privacy and how those raised in an online world, where their every move can be recorded and broadcast to thousands of strangers without their consent (or even knowledge) are facing new erosions of their rights, and on a scale never seen before.

The remainder of the book sets out what we can all do, armed with a new awareness of childism, to call for and bring about positive change. Chapter 7 asks you to imagine a world without childism, considering what our childcare, education, mental-health support and more would look like if they were truly designed to meet the needs of children and their families. Chapter 8 discusses how to tackle those who loudly declare 'It never did me any harm!' and dismiss the idea and very existence of childism. In this chapter, we will also consider how to work with people who declare that those who believe in childism are woke snowflakes, and understand what causes somebody to hold this viewpoint. Chapter 9 introduces my blueprint for an anti-childist society and invites you to become a cycle breaker, with advice on how best to do this while also considering your own needs. Finally, Chapter 10 is focused on myth busting – providing rebuttals to the comments and criticisms you will so often hear from anti-childism detractors.

My hope is that by the end of this book you will not only understand childism and be fired up to tackle it, but you will also know how to do so. Being anti-childist is about considering how we treat children today, being aware of and removing discrimination, in order to give children a voice and help them to know that they matter, just as much as adults. Childhood isn't

just practice for adulthood – children are important now. And the more we understand and accept this, the more likely it will be that they will grow up feeling happy and confident, knowing that their voices matter.

If we want to leave a better world for our children, we need to consider the way we treat them, and to do this we need to understand, and ultimately accept, that we ourselves weren't treated very well by adults during our own childhoods. Once we become aware of the childism that *we* faced and that it is omnipresent in the world today, we can either remain part of the problem, doing nothing to solve it, or we can use any resulting discomfort as fuel to fire us into making a change and breaking the childist cycle for our own children and those who follow.

Which will you choose?

At this point I feel I should, perhaps, apologise to you because this book is going to make you feel uncomfortable and angry, but it's necessary. It is a call to arms: we must change things.

Are you ready to be part of an anti-childist revolution? Then it's time to go down the rabbit hole . . .

Chapter 1

The Case Against Childism

A person's a person no matter how small.
Dr Seuss, from *Horton Hears a Who!*

When I had my first child, in 2002, I struggled to follow the mainstream parenting advice of the time, particularly when it came to sleep. My son was easily the worst sleeper of all the babies I came across in the baby groups we attended. The other parents were able to put their babies down awake in their cots in their blacked-out nurseries, give them a quick kiss on the cheek, then walk out and close the door. Their babies were capable of the miraculous skill of 'self-soothing', while mine would cling to me desperately. He wailed when I put him down, his arms reaching up for me, big brown, teary eyes pleading with me to pick him up again. My baby's sleep and feeding schedules were erratic and unpredictable, while theirs would sleep and feed to the clock, with military predictability.

Desperate to 'fix' my baby, I turned to books and online advice that urged me to leave him to cry for a few minutes, while I waited, physically unresponsive, nearby. Apparently, in my quest to soothe my son, I had created bad habits that we now had to break. We lasted for one horrible, heartbreaking night. I couldn't bear to put him through any more trauma. Reluctantly, I continued to meet his needs for physical contact throughout the day and

night, all the while feeling that I was somehow a worse parent than those with the perfect sleeping babies because I had failed to do what was best for him.

My son quickly grew into a toddler and my worries moved on from sleep to be replaced by concerns about his tantrums. Here, the books, television experts and online chat groups told me to reward him when he was well behaved with stickers on a chart displayed on our fridge door, and to punish him by sending him for time out when he was 'naughty'. I struggled to make him stay in one place when we attempted time out, so one day, in desperation, I learned that if I shut him in our small entrance porch, he could not open the door handle and escape. For a week, I faithfully took him to the porch and closed the door every time he misbehaved. I would stand the other side of the door, while he howled and pleaded with me to let him out, timing two minutes – a minute for each year of his age, as advised. This seemed even worse than the sleep training we'd attempted. It physically hurt my heart to hear him begging me to open the door, and when his time was up, he once again clung to me, heaving big sobs for what felt like hours.

Once again, I abandoned the technique advocated by so many and decided that I just wasn't strong enough to follow the advice. I had failed to sleep train my son and now I was failing to discipline him. I felt like a social pariah at baby and toddler groups, with the placid, good-sleeper babies and compliant toddlers. Eventually, I stopped going to them. Instead, I stayed at home, where I didn't feel pressure to follow the popular childcare methods that produced such 'easy', 'well-behaved' children.

As the months and years went by, I learned that the best way to help my son (and his three siblings who followed) to sleep and to regulate his emotions, was through connection, meeting his needs and helping him to feel safe and secure. I began to learn his triggers and how to avoid them, and how to de-escalate him when his big feelings threatened to boil over. We were both so

much happier. Slowly, I learned to trust my instincts to nurture my son and to place his needs above the opinions of others. And the more I did so, the more I resented the advice I had received – not just from books, strangers on the Internet and the television parenting experts of the time, but from healthcare professionals, too.

Talk of 'ignore, punish, praise and reward' and teaching self-soothing was everywhere. Finally, I began to question the commonly held wisdom more than I questioned my own instincts and my son's behaviour. I realised that the advice *felt* wrong because it *was* wrong. It was all about ignoring a child's needs, not meeting them. It was all about disconnecting, rather than connecting. It was about compliance over compassion and forcing independence before meeting the primal need for dependence. The advice didn't work for me. But perhaps most importantly, it didn't work for my son.

I grew angry at the messages so prevalent in society which led me to try to raise my son in a way that felt instinctively wrong to both me and him. However, these experiences also planted a seed – one that would take a further five years to begin to sprout and another two decades to come to fruition. They became the fuel behind my desire to raise awareness of the way society discriminates against children and their needs in an attempt to prioritise the wants and wishes of adults. While I would dearly love to relive those early years free of self-doubt, to enjoy every precious snuggle with my son and to treat him with the full respect he truly deserved from the moment he was born, I wouldn't be doing what I do today without them. The realisation of the terrible childism that exists in our society today, from the very moment a baby is born, is the inspiration for everything I have done in my professional life since.

In 2007, I started to run classes in my home, supporting parents to use what I called 'gentle parenting' methods. We spoke about the importance of nurturance, empathy and meeting the needs

of our children. We spoke of respecting babies and children as we would respect adults. Through word of mouth, these small classes quickly grew and I developed gentle-parenting workshops that I delivered, and still do to this day, to thousands of parents. I spoke of tackling sleep and tricky behaviour with a mindset of placing the child at the heart of the conversation, removing the discrimination towards children that features so heavily in most parenting advice. In 2011, I began to write my first parenting book, with the aim of producing the book that I wished I had read myself as a new parent – one that honoured my baby's needs and my instincts. That first book focused on gentle parenting from the very beginning of life, because that is where childism begins, and this is the reason why you will find two whole chapters devoted to the discriminatory treatment of children under three here. One book quickly led to another, and another, and now, fourteen books on, I have become known as 'the inventor of gentle parenting'. While the label is flattering, it isn't true. I simply put into words what parents did for centuries naturally before the so-called experts came along and told them that they were doing everything wrong.

As I reflect on my personal and professional past, I realise that everything I have done and experienced to date has led me to writing this book. My passion for battling injustice and empowering parents to trust their instincts and treat children with the same respect we would show an adult is, ultimately, a calling to make as many people as possible aware of childism and how we can change it. This anti-childism message is the 'why' behind the 'how to' of the gentle-parenting messages I am so well known for, and which we will discuss later in this book. As Dr Seuss so succinctly said in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, 'A person's a person no matter how small' – the rights of children should matter just as much as those of adults.

Origins of the word 'childism'?

The word 'childism' was first used by doctors Chester Pierce and Gail Allen in 1975, in a psychiatric journal article.[1] They defined it as 'the automatic presumption of superiority of any adult over any child; it results in the adult's needs, desires, hopes and fears taking unquestioned precedence over those of the child'. The idea, sadly, received little attention over the following three decades, until 2012, when the late American academic and psychotherapist Elisabeth Young-Bruehl published her book *Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children*.[2] Young-Bruehl introduced the concept of childism, saying:

> ... 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?

Young-Bruehl ultimately called for society to reconsider the way it views childhood and treats children, with an emphasis on ending child incarceration, reducing child abuse and reducing the voting age to sixteen. While Young-Bruehl's work was an academic success, it sadly did not reach a wider audience in the general public. My hope with this book, taking inspiration from the work of Pierce, Allen and Young-Bruehl, is to help bring the word 'childism' to the forefront of the vocabularies of as many adults as possible. I believe it is too important a concept to remain in the exclusive domain of academia. It's time that it was discussed as much as other 'isms' and forms of discrimination

in society today. Everybody needs to be aware of the word and what it means.

Why childism is harmful

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of childism is that it impacts every single one of us and therefore every single adult who has ever had, or ever will have, children will have been affected by it, whether they are aware of it or not. It is insidious. Those who make our laws and write rules and guidelines that affect children will have experienced it. Those who decide public budgets and expenditure have been affected by it. And those who are meant to protect the rights of children have lived through it. But why does this matter? Because it means we are all a little bit damaged, whether we realise it or not, and our childhood wiring tends to shape our subconscious beliefs – that children are somehow worth less and deserve less than adults – in such a way that we continue the cycle of discrimination, simply because we don't know any different. We relive what we experienced in childhood when we have children of our own and our buried beliefs influence every action we take as parents.

Most adults struggle to regulate their emotions well. We frequently shout, sulk, threaten, argue, worry, ignore, suppress, detract and distract when we are faced with big feelings and difficult situations. We struggle with our mental health and our relationships, we struggle to strike a good work–life balance, we struggle to set and uphold boundaries to protect our physical and psychological health, we struggle to ask for help and we struggle with our own self-talk and self-esteem. These struggles are almost all due to the fact that the adults in our lives didn't help us to regulate our emotions when we were children. They stem from the times when we were left alone to cry, when we were scolded for being too loud, too much, too needy. When we were led to

believe that *we* were the problem. The roots are in the times when we didn't get the human touch we needed, when we felt misunderstood, unheard and unloved and grew to believe that a part of us was therefore unlovable and not worthy of respect. I'm not saying any of this to blame our parents and carers – because they are just as much victims of childism as us, dysregulated from their own childist upbringings. We will talk about this much more in Chapter 8, with a focus on understanding the adults in our lives, rather than blaming and shaming them (because the latter helps nobody to move forwards), but for now it's just important to recognise that we have all been impacted by childism, whether we realise it or not.

What happens when individuals grow up with their need for love, nurturance, support and dependence as children having been unmet, believing that children are somehow less than adults? How can they, as adults, fully meet their children's needs for the same things? The answer is they can't – not without some work – which is why so many parents struggle with anger, frustration and short tempers around their children. To raise well-regulated children, we must first acknowledge that our emotional needs in childhood weren't fully met and, as a result, we struggle to regulate ourselves, especially around our children. We must acknowledge the existence of childism. This is difficult and often painful, and so the awareness, or 'wokeness', as some mistakenly refer to it, remains buried and the cycle of discrimination continues. Society continues to advocate for the needs of adults over those of children, sleep training being a great example of this (something we will discuss in depth in Chapter 3). The common ways in which we discipline children today are also an example of prioritising the rights of adults over those of children, with resulting harmful outcomes (we will discuss the research into the harm caused here in Chapter 4).

In reality, the most equitable answer to any parenting dilemma is surely one that considers the needs of both parent and child and

tries to find an acceptable middle ground. Once again, however, for this to happen, adults must genuinely consider the rights of children and break free from the delusion that we treat them well in our society. As the saying goes, 'hurt people hurt people', and a whole generation of adults who, as children, grew to believe that they didn't matter as much as the adults in their lives, are likely to perpetuate this belief, and the hurt, with any children in their care.

Gentle parenting – the key to combatting childism?

You've probably come across gentle parenting before, or the term, anyway. Sadly, though, a lot of articles and videos that claim to be discussing and illustrating gentle parenting are uninformed. It is commonly reduced to a series of statements, or actions, which cover what to do or say to children in a certain situation. This isn't gentle parenting. Similarly, many seem to believe that it is a style of parenting devoid of discipline, allowing children to do anything they want, prioritising their needs and rights above their parents', until parents become perpetually exhausted martyrs. This isn't gentle parenting either.

What does real gentle parenting look like? In short, it is a philosophy, an ethos, where the rights and needs of both adults and children are considered, and where a healthy balance is drawn. It hinges on three words: understanding, empathy and respect. Understanding normal child development and behaviour and deviations from it in order to have realistic expectations of a child; empathising with children and attempting to see the world through their eyes, so that we can connect with them to collaboratively solve any problems together; and respecting children as the individual, worthy beings that they are, rather than

seeing them as second-class citizens or 'adults in the making'. Gentle parenting isn't about a set of superficial discipline tactics or rehearsed stock phrases to say to children, as so many articles and videos would have it. It's a mindset, or rather a mind shift. If I'm asked to describe it in one short sentence, I simply say, 'It's treating children the way in which you wish you had been treated yourself as a child.'

In my opinion, gentle parenting is the answer to combatting childism – because if we fully respect children, we not only respect their needs, but we also respect their human rights.

Child rights are human rights

Before we go any further, I feel it would be a good idea to take a quick whistle-stop tour of human rights, specifically those involving the rights of children. I believe it is impossible to talk about childism without first understanding the legal rights children should have and considering whether these are met or breached in society today.

Human rights, or the belief that we are all legally entitled to the same basic rights from birth through to death, are universal moral principles that are enshrined by law. They strive for fairness, justice and equality and aim to protect individuals of all ages from discrimination. They cover areas such as the right to receive an education, the right to privacy and the right to freedom of expression. Importantly, we are protected from discrimination in respect of upholding and following these rights, too.

The human rights that so many of us take for granted today exist thanks to work that took place after the end of the Second World War in an attempt to prevent a recurrence of the horrors from that time. In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly met to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (abbreviated to UDHR).[3] This lengthy document sought to enshrine the

universal rights of all individuals into law. Stating that we are all 'born free and equal in dignity and rights . . . regardless of nationality, place of residence, gender, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status'. While the UDHR protects rights for all humans, they are not specific to age, and therefore do not separate child and adult rights. Considering their unique needs, children need further protection legally, with rights that are specific to them.

The history of child rights

The Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child is often termed the original declaration of child rights,[4] written by Eglantyne Jebb, a British teacher and social reformer who was passionate about the treatment of starving children in Germany and Austria during the First World War, when the troops of the Allied forces prevented the passage of much-needed food and medical supplies. Jebb felt strongly that children should not suffer because of the war and campaigned to parliament for change. In 1919, the charity Save the Children was born. After the war had ended, in 1924, Jebb joined world leaders at the Genevan League of Nations Convention to share her idea of a declaration of child rights. The declaration was quickly adopted legally. Sadly, Jebb died only nine years later, at the age of fifty-two – however, her legacy lives on in the shape of Save the Children, which is still operational and influential today.

Building upon and inspired by Jebb's Geneva declaration, with child-specific rights in mind, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (or UNCRC) treaty was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989.[5] It is a legally binding agreement for members (countries) to uphold the specific rights of children and, importantly, the UNCRC is of utmost significance when we consider childism and any attempts to stop it. The UNCRC is regarded

as having been enormously effective in improving the lives of children around the world and has influenced political policies on a global level. It is not perfect, however, and many countries do not uphold its tenets, whether purposefully or unknowingly. In addition, the world in which we live is rapidly changing, with new threats and potential discrimination towards children arising, for instance those posed by access to the Internet.

The UNCRC has been formally signed and adopted (known as ratification) by all United Nations countries, bar one – the United States of America. The USA has signed the UNCRC, which indicates its intention to ratify it at some point in the future; however, ratification has not moved forwards outside of individual states. This is, in part, because of opposition from religious organisations in the USA who disagree with the contents of the UNCRC and argue that it would meddle too much with individual family choices and decisions, and potentially erode parental rights.

What does the UNCRC contain?

The UNCRC includes fifty-four sections (known as articles), each covering different aspects of child rights. Overall, these articles protect children from physical and emotional harm, ensure they receive an education and have the right to be heard and express their opinions, in order that each can live to their full potential, without discrimination due to age, race, sex, religion, abilities or other characteristics and safeguard their rights to a relationship with their parents, without undue separation from them.

Although all the articles are important, some are critical when it comes to childism and the contents of this book, including the following:

- **Article 12** Covering the rights of children to hold and express their own views, it states: 'Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her

own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'

- **Article 13** Covering the rights of children to freedom of expression, it states: 'This right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.'
- **Article 19** Covering the rights of children to protection from physical and emotional violence, it states: 'Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.'
- **Article 23** Covering the rights of children with disabilities, which include learning disabilities and neurodivergence, it states: 'Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.'
- **Article 27** Covering the rights of children to a good standard of living, it states: 'Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.'
- **Article 28** Covering the rights of children to a good education, with one section stating: 'Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline

is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention.'

- **Article 29** Continuing the rights of education, the first section states: 'Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.'
- **Article 31** Covering the rights of children to free time, it states: 'Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.'

I won't go into further detail about the UNCRC here, but we'll be picking up discussion of these articles again a little later in the chapter and again in Chapter 5, when we discuss state-sponsored childism, specifically relating to education, mental health and special-educational-needs provision, and economic help provided to families today.

Child rights in the United Kingdom

With the UK's ratification of the UNCRC in 1991, you would imagine that child rights are the same as all other human rights in the UK. Indeed, the UNCRC should protect all children from any actions which infringe their human rights and prevent them from being on the receiving end of poor treatment due to their age. Unfortunately, this is not the case in many countries, including the UK, especially when it comes to three key areas where child rights are not equal to those of adults and where children are actively discriminated against due to their age. These are:

- corporal punishment
- the age of consent and body autonomy
- voting age.

Corporal punishment in the United Kingdom

Since the late 1990s, government power in the UK has been decentralised through a process known as devolution. This means that the ability to make decisions and certain laws for each of the countries in the UK has moved from being centralised in parliament in Westminster, London to separate governments and parliaments in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In turn, this means that the countries that comprise the UK have different laws when it comes to using physical punishment as a form of disciplining children. The laws at the time of writing are as follows:

Scotland

Smacking children was made illegal in Scotland in November 2020, with all forms of physical discipline – including smacking, spanking, slapping and tapping – being prohibited by law, meaning that any of these acts would be treated in the same way as they would if they were done to an adult, i.e. as physical assault.[6] Those witnessing physical assault of children are encouraged to report the crime to the Scottish Police.

Wales

The Welsh government made physical discipline of children – including smacking, slapping, hitting and shaking – illegal in March 2022.[7] The law applies to everybody, regardless of whether they are the child's parent or unrelated, and also to visitors to

Wales, even if they are from other countries. As with Scottish law, anybody witnessing physical discipline towards children is encouraged to report the crime to social services or the police.

England and Northern Ireland

In England and Northern Ireland, it is illegal for a professional, such as nursery or teaching staff, to use physical discipline on children. However, parents and legal guardians are permitted to hit, slap, smack, spank, shove and shake their children, so long as it is deemed 'reasonable punishment'.[8] Reasonable punishment is open to interpretation, however, and many believe physical punishment to be reasonable if no lasting bruises or cuts are left on the skin and the child's actions were deemed bad enough to warrant it.

In Scotland, a group of parents are campaigning to overturn the Scottish smacking ban in order to be legally allowed to smack their children if they personally consider the punishment 'reasonable' (the group is called 'Be Reasonable'); they believe that smacking and hitting are not the same thing, and that smacking is justified if children are between two and six years of age and do not understand or cannot rationalise verbal forms of discipline.[9] You have to wonder why parents believe that a young child will learn from being struck if they lack rational thinking skills and cannot learn from being spoken to. This argument seems to be the very antithesis of being reasonable.

Speaking at the time of the Welsh ban, in 2022, then education secretary Nadhim Zahawi stated that he did not want to make physical punishment illegal in England, because he did not want to 'end up in a world where the state is nannying people about how they bring up their children'.[10] In a YouGov poll held in 2021, 34 per cent of respondents believed that physical punishment is still an effective way to improve a child's behaviour, with 41 per cent of respondents who had at least one child under the age of

eighteen believing that parents should legally be allowed to hit their children.[11] We'll talk a lot more about smacking, and other forms of discipline, in Chapter 4, but for now I would like to put to you two questions:

1. Is smacking/slapping/hitting/spanking/tapping children in contravention of article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (see pages 18–21 for a reminder)?
2. Are child rights really human rights if it is illegal for us to hit anybody over the age of eighteen, for any reason, and yet in England and Northern Ireland we may hit children so long as the punishment is deemed 'reasonable'?

The age of consent and body autonomy

In the UK, a child under the age of eighteen is not allowed to get a tattoo, even if they have parental consent. In the USA, there is no overarching federal law concerning the age of consent for receiving a tattoo; however, individual state laws (in all states) stipulate that the minimum age is eighteen. In Scotland, it is illegal for a child up to the age of sixteen to get their ears or other parts of their body pierced without parental consent, yet in England and Wales, there is no minimum age of consent for piercing children. One in six children is believed to have had their ears pierced in the UK by the time they are six years old. The question is: who is giving consent for this to happen? The children? Or their parents?

Gillick competence is a term often used to decide whether a child has the mental capacity and understanding to give informed consent for medical procedures. It is often used alongside something known as Fraser guidelines. Both Gillick competence and Fraser guidelines originate from a legal case in the 1980s, which

sought to determine whether a sixteen-year-old girl could be given oral contraceptive pills without her mother's consent (the case was known as Gillick v. West Norfolk and Wisbech Area Health Authority).[12] The outcome of the case was that doctors were allowed to prescribe contraceptives to the girl, and therefore other children under sixteen years old, without parental consent, if the child was deemed able to give informed consent. Fraser guidelines are used to determine whether children have the necessary maturity to make medical decisions relating to their sexual health, whereas Gillick competence is used for decisions relating to medical and other issues as well. There is no lower age limit for either Gillick competence or meeting the Fraser guidelines, and no set list of questions to ask. Instead, they are assessed on a case-by-case basis looking at the understanding, maturity, rationality and emotional skills of the child. Many would argue that it is uncommon for a child to be assessed as Gillick competent before their teen years, although theoretically there is nothing to stop a much younger child being assessed as competent if they are genuinely thought to possess the ability to make a rational, informed decision.

I'd now like to ask three questions, considering the concept of Gillick competence and child body autonomy.

1. If a child is too young to be determined as Gillick competent, should their parent or guardian be able to make choices for them that may carry pain and risk, if those choices are merely cosmetic and solely for the enjoyment of adults – say, deciding to pierce a baby's ears?
2. If a sixteen-year-old, who is mature and would be considered Gillick competent (meaning they fully understand all risks and the long-term consequences), would like a tattoo, is it childist if UK law makes it illegal for them to get one until they turn eighteen?

3. If a parent or guardian can give consent for their child's body to be cosmetically modified from infancy (as is the case with ear piercing), is it childist that that same child cannot legally choose to cosmetically modify their own body (say, with a tattoo) until they turn eighteen?

Voting age

Voting for who you would like to run your constituency and – perhaps most importantly – your country is largely restricted around the world to adults only, meaning children, who are likely to be affected for the longest time by political decisions, are prohibited from voting in most countries. There are a few exceptions, these being Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guernsey, the Isle of Man, Malta, Nicaragua, Scotland (in local elections, the Scottish referendum and those relating to Scottish parliament only) and Wales (in local elections and those relating to Welsh parliament only). Brazil reduced the age of voting eligibility to sixteen in 1988 (coming into force in 1989); Austria became the first country in Europe to change their voting laws when they reduced the voting age to sixteen in 2011; and Scotland's devolved powers saw the voting age drop to sixteen in 2014. A handful of countries, including Greece and Indonesia, allow seventeen-year-olds to vote. At the turn of this century, many states in the USA debated lowering the voting age (including California and Florida), however no change was ultimately made.

One argument commonly used to limit the vote to over-eighteens is that children do not pay taxes. However, income tax is not restricted to a certain age – rather, it is based on earnings. Sixteen-year-olds are legally allowed to work for others, or become self-employed, and will pay income tax if their earnings are high enough. Similarly, many sixteen-year-olds undertake government-backed paid apprenticeships, contributing to the

national economy. If a child is earning and understands politics (arguably, those sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds studying for politics A-level have a better understanding than many adults), it makes no sense to prevent them from having any involvement in what happens in their future, especially when we consider that sixteen-year-olds are almost always considered to be Gillick competent, too. The UK's EU (Brexit) referendum is a prime example of not giving children a voice about important matters that will directly affect their future. Of those eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds who voted, 74 per cent voted to remain. Contrast this to the 42 per cent of sixty-five-year-olds and over who voted to remain. Of course, we do not know how sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds would have voted, but it is not unreasonable to assume, given the trends shown by the majority of lower ages voting to remain, that over 75 per cent of them would have voted that way, too.

I would like to put to you three questions here:

1. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states: 'Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.' Is restricting the voting age to over-eighteens potentially a contravention of article 12?
2. Should a well-informed sixteen-year-old be allowed to vote for their future? Especially if that sixteen-year-old works and pays income tax, and would also be considered Gillick competent?
3. Are countries who restrict votes to adults only genuinely respecting child rights, or are they childist?

We will come back to the childism shown in politics and government actions again in Chapter 5, when we discuss what

I call 'state-sponsored childism' – there is a lot more to be said about it.

Child rights are human rights, take two

I'd like to end this chapter with the idea that child rights are human rights. Children are humans, just like you and me, and while they may need special rights to protect them, these should not be at the expense of their basic human rights. It makes no sense that you cannot hit your partner, friend, colleague, parent or a random person in the street in England or Northern Ireland without breaking the law and potentially being convicted of common assault, or worse, yet you are legally allowed to strike a child if the punishment is considered 'reasonable'.

Children, who arguably have more passion and political knowledge than the average adult are not allowed to have a say in their future by voting, even though the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is clear that their voices should be heard. And despite having specific rights protecting children's bodies, parents are still allowed to make holes in them to insert jewellery to make them look more cosmetically pleasing to adults. Child rights are not human rights – not yet, anyway.

We have all been children; we should be their biggest champions. But as we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, many of us weren't treated very well as children, often causing us to unconsciously perpetuate the same treatment and beliefs: that children are somehow worth less and are therefore entitled to less than adults. We seem to view adulthood as life, and childhood as a mere rehearsal for it, with only the fully fledged adult performers receiving respect for their rights.

In essence, aiming to stop discrimination towards children

means honouring our own needs, making peace with our past, trying to do the right thing by children in the present and fighting for a better future for the next generation. In a world full of childist beliefs, it takes bravery to stand up and speak out. There are a lot of damaged people in our society, and until now they have been allowed to have the loudest voices, ridiculing those who disagree. But now is the time for change – and to change the future, we must understand where we have come from. We must study the childist roots of our society in order to weed them out and allow a better future to grow and blossom. Chapter 2 takes us back to the past – are you ready to go back for the future of children? Then read on . . .