

The Everyday Silencing of Children and the Feminist Politics of Voice

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ABSTRACT

Using feminist theorizing on silencing, this paper argues that the silencing of children is a political phenomenon that unfortunately constitutes a “normal” part of childhood. Such “everyday” experiences of marginalization are documented in a number of arenas, from classroom rules to research practices. Our inattention to it leaves an ethical gap in our understanding of democratic relationships in which children and adults interact. The degree and forms silencing take vary, depending upon such factors as gender, race, and class.

Keywords: silencing, voice, children and democracy, feminism

Introduction

“Silencing” is a term used to describe situations in which words do not exist to capture the experiences of marginalized groups, where education is denied which would help the oppressed use the words that do exist, or where the context in which certain people act is so unresponsive, distorting, threatening, or punitive that they might as well or dare not speak. A “core dynamic of oppression of all kinds is the silencing of the subjugated” (Crenshaw and Seymour 2009, 12), and virtually every liberatory political movement opposes silencing as an indignity and a disenfranchisement, an erasure of the self and a loss to society of vital contributions, conversations, and commitment. Yet outside of extreme cases—war zones, child abuse, and orphanages, for example—precious little discussion of the silencing of children exists in either popular or academic literature. This constitutes both an ethical and a political lapse.

As with other social movements, some have suggested that at its very heart, “feminism is concerned with finding a voice” (Gordon 1990, 127). “Voice” represents more than speech. “The theme of ‘voice’—voicing experiences, claiming the right not only to speak but also to be listened to—has become a metaphor for political recognition, self-determination and full presence in knowledge” (Thorne 2002, 1). The question that informs this paper concerns the extent to which the profoundly important feminist work on voice and silence is sufficient for thinking about the silencing of children:

Is that framework adequate, or does the addition of children to the conversation presents us with an opportunity—or even a moral demand—to strengthen our theorizing and activism regarding the voices of young people?

Using feminist theorizing on silencing, this paper argues that the silencing of children is a political phenomenon that unfortunately constitutes a “normal” part of childhood. Such everyday experiences of marginalization are documented in many arenas, from classroom rules to research practices. Our inattention to it leaves an ethical and political gap in our understanding and practice of democracy. The degree and forms silencing take vary, depending upon such factors as gender, race, and class.

My starting point is this: we clearly understand that “women speak in ways that are limited and shaped by men’s greater social power and control, exercised both individually and institutionally (and exercised to control less privileged men as well as women)” (Devault 2004, 229); thus, we might, almost commonsensically, expect that children’s speech, too, is shaped by their even more profound personal and institutional powerlessness, and by the usually unquestioned, often unchecked control adults exercise over them. We need to understand how this general status quo, and variations on it, affects children, adults, and various communities.¹

Feminists understand that silencing and voice involve issues ranging from epistemological authority to democratic politics. We understand, too, that the impact of silencing touches both psychological wellbeing and the fabric of civic community. But the silencing of children most definitely is not similarly framed, and the cause seems obvious: children are not seen as participants in the life of politics or of reason, which those frameworks seem to presuppose. Further, childhood is frequently associated with freedom from burdensome obligations, and preferred images of childhood are ill fits for talk of politics, inequality, and oppression. Such factors make it quite difficult to hear, believe, and rectify the silencing, or to take seriously the political claim I make in this paper: that injustice is part of the very structure, the *normal* experience of childhood.

Since this essay is about the “everyday silencing of children,” I first discuss feminist interest in a focus on the everyday, and how that lens provides a distinctive and invaluable approach to feminist work on children. Then I explore several social practices and pronouncements that, usually without explanation, defense, or evil intent, are unethically dismissive of young people—variously ignoring, excluding, or condemning them. Because I want to argue that what we are confronted with is a *political* problem with a broad range of material manifestations, the examples I select come from varied sources—the popular press, social science research, the history of philosophy, and online resources. I turn next to an example of an everyday practice: interruption. I find fascinating the attention paid to children interrupting adults, and the variance in how we talk about interruption based on the age of the interrupter. When norms of interruption both invisibly and forcefully get incorporated into the everyday, they, like other forms of silencing, have broad, deep, and even lasting effects inimical to feminist and democratic goals such as respect and participation. I close with thoughts about what is at stake for various parties in the silencing of the young, and why, despite the personal labor and institutional change involved, adults should commit ourselves

to doing the necessary work to invite in, listen to, and incorporate the disparate voices of children of all ages, sexes, races, classes, and abilities.

Everyday Silencing

*Classroom rules (I am not making these up): “No talking in the hallways.” “Use polite speech.” “No talking in the bathrooms.” “Follow all directions without argument. “Do not talk to other students . . . during independent work time.” “Obtain permission before speaking.” “Do not ‘call out’ in class or make comments not related to the lesson.” “Do not smack your lips [or] tsk.” “Complaining is not allowed!”*ⁱⁱ

Rules like these are not only found on classroom bulletin boards; all of those cited here were posted online and so, apparently, were seen as unproblematic and even intended as models to be helpful to other teachers. They demonstrate that—to a degree that is often truly astonishing—adults regulate what children can say, to whom, about what, when, where, and in what tone. There are consequences for abiding by these classroom rules and related social guidelines and for breaking them. The enforcers, enthusiastic or merely reflexive, include both friends and strangers.

The saying that “children should be seen and not heard” offers a succinct capturing of questionable everyday practices, though we should add to that proverb “unless adults request and control their speech.” This familiar saw seems historically to have been applied especially to young females (Martin, nd). It equates, for both infants and older youth, being “good” with being quiet, adaptive, and undemanding and, especially for girls, silently attractive (they can, in this sense, be seen). This *horrid* saying makes clear that adult-adult conversations are exclusive and normally take priority. This 15th century proverb, which we might assume is but a remnant of a less enlightened era, continues to evolve, as today, for example, we distract children from conversation with adults with technology, from movie screens in cars to laptop computer games (ladybren 2013).

The sheer number of situations and places in which rules for children, of all ages and in all grade-levels,ⁱⁱⁱ forbid or significantly limit speech fails to teach them (or adults) the social and intellectual value of civil conversation, and makes quite clear that in the hierarchy of values, voice does not rate very highly. These are mighty formidable messages to send anyone, especially, I will ultimately argue, to young people.

Because of my work in the history of feminism, I recal a very relevant feminist predecessor, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935). In *Concerning Children* (1900), Gilman explains that individuals and societies must address much more than severe cases of child abuse, neglect, and impoverishment. While horrible, we at least understand such incidents and situations as devastating, and make some attempts to intervene. She asks, instead, that we confront the way most of us deal with children most of the time—the small, common, everyday acts that in fact deeply influence who children are and can become. In thinking about the ways we fail to listen to children, interrupt both their speech and their quiet, and forbid or

discount their words, I am holding on to the concerns of this inspiring philosophical foremother; I try, however, to bring them into the contemporary era, where we have another century of feminist theory and practice to bring to bear on the problems that occupied her and still bedevil us. Gilman's fundamental points are that these everyday practices are wrong in themselves and connected to those more obviously horrible practices we easily condemn. The fact that we face similar problems in our time speaks to some unfortunate continuities in perspectives on and treatment of children, including gendered expectations of them.

While enormously influential, Gilman was not the first or last feminist theorist to recognize how everyday experiences sustain and reinforce inequality. Going back at least to the work of Mary Astell (1668-1731) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), we find detailed analyses and critiques of such everyday gendered practices as flattery, courtship, and dress. They “get” how daily rituals and customs almost invisibly but nonetheless effectively reinforce women's vulnerability and subordination. Today, as well, feminists continue to address the politics of ordinary gendered practices, from opening doors (Frye 1983) to closing topics of conversation (Tannen 1990); from surgically “improving” bodies (Davis 1995) to accepting others' verdicts that one cannot be improved (Belenky et. al. 1997); and from suppressing one's story for the sake of outsiders' (assumed) perceptions of intra-community well-being (Crenshaw 1989), to limiting one's physical movements for the sake of “safety” and propriety (Griffin 1982). Each author, historical and contemporary, concludes that these acts, unevenly performed and differently read, reinforce inequality and contribute to various forms of silencing. It is, then, in these everyday acts that we can see habits that shape minds and bodies—routines that enforce notions of in/ability and ir/relevance, and norms that demand or expect self-sacrifice, even of one's voice, which others come to see as normal and even preferable.

One of the most important and earliest contemporary feminist sociological theorists of the “everyday,” Dorothy Smith, understands it as the complex, wide-ranging, already-existing environment into which we all enter and which affects groups of people differently: “The actualities of our everyday world are already socially organized. Settings, equipment, ‘environment,’ schedules, occasions, etc., as well as the enterprises and routines of actors are socially produced and concretely and symbolically organized prior to our practice. By beginning from . . . original and immediate knowledge of [the] world, sociology offers a way of making its socially organized properties first observable and then problematic” (1974). A feminist look at the “everyday” studies comprehensible social organization that is so “normal” as to be almost invisible. It involves not only relatively “neutral” practices, but also unjust practices that can and must be made visible and addressed. Such a focus points us to the too-readily unquestioned and taken-for-granted and, eventually, to the emancipatory struggles that resist them (Bargetz 2009, Andrews 2012).

Clearly feminists today and throughout history have understood the power of the everyday (whether or not they called it that) to legitimize and enforce inequality, but have also seen in it cracks in which opposition can take root. Most often, they see the everyday as unquestioned and unanalyzed, however, despite the incomparable role played by its norms and rituals. My hope is more fully to apply hard-won feminist lessons about both silencing and the everyday to childhood where, along similar lines, we prize obedience in the young and call quiet children (especially girls) “good,” where “talking back” is a punishable offense

(hooks 1989) and being told “No!” is a source of children’s daily frustration (Stanton 1993 [1898], 10). As Gilman says, “The child who ‘minds’ promptly and unquestioningly is the ideal” (2003, 30). I take this paper, then, to be a response to feminism encouraging us, in the world of Cynthia Enloe, and the spirit of authors from Gilman to Smith, to “expand[] our investigatory agenda, ... exert more intellectual energy... [and] engage[] with those who take any power structure as unproblematic” (2004, 2-3).

The Dismissals

Men might be free, but women must still obey. Women are beginning to be free, but still the child remains,—the under-dog always; and he, at least, must obey. On this we are still practically at one,—Catholic and Protestant, soldier and farmer, subject and citizen (Gilman 2003, 35).

We regularly write children off as individuals with voices worth hearing, questions worth addressing, and wills worth recognizing. It happens in classrooms, households, the press, and scholarly literature. As the quote from Gilman conveys, a troubling near-universality of opinion appears on the topic of children’s proper place, even among groups who agree on little else. The following examples are purposely drawn from different arenas to illustrate the breadth of the problem—its *political* character. Both the authoritativeness and the thoughtlessness with which the dismissals are issued precisely mirror the way many everyday ideas and practices are expressed.

The first arena is the history of philosophy. Philosophers of the highest repute—in this case John Stuart Mill (1808-1873)—often toss aside all their most cherished principles when it comes to children, and do so both irresponsibly and with minimal reflection. Mill famously assert[s] one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealing of society with the individual. . . . That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others (1978 [1859], 9).

In Mill’s freest society individuals decide for themselves matters great and small, from what kind of life they want to lead to whom they choose as friends and what kind of food they will eat. Interfering with someone else’s free will (and conversation, even if intended to persuade, is not interference) is justified *only* if someone’s actions will harm others. But before delving into the consequences of his core principle, Mill stops and makes clear that children—not only the very young but anyone below a society’s age of majority—are explicitly excluded from its application. It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children, or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury (9).

Interfering with the decisions and actions of children is acceptable in more situations for more reasons than with adults—not only to prevent them harming others or the social order, but also to prevent them from harming themselves, or from being injured by another. The grounds for the exclusion of children are terribly important: first, that they are “still in a state to require being taken care of by others,” and second, that they are not “capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. Until . . . [they are], there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one” (10).

The possible objections here are numerous and damning. One set of issues revolves around “care.” Mill never enquires into what principles *do* apply to those who “require being taken care of by others”. Caught up in the dynamics of liberal if utilitarian individualism, he does not speak of the extent to which we all require some such care, or how care relationships themselves require justice (Moskop 2015). Second, all Mill does recommend for children is obedience, a dangerous and undemocratic “virtue”—the one most vehemently criticized by Gilman—that overlaps mightily with silencing. Next, he leaves their fate to luck (if indeed the situations he describes are “lucky”). Declaring despotism a legitimate mode of government for children, Mill, like others before and after him, justifies forms of dominion over the young that he deems illegitimate and dangerous for others. How are children prepared for democratic citizenship if they have not participated in civil discourse and have experienced only despotic rule? This raises the last and most fundamental issue: Mill’s claim that minors are not “capable of being improved by free and equal discussion.” Children *learn* to discuss more and more proficiently with practice, the sort of practice Mill denies them and that classroom rules today still fail to appreciate or encourage.

A second example is from social science research. One scholar admits that “there has been remarkably little research into how children make sense of contemporary patterns of family life, and children’s perspectives on their everyday lives has been largely ignored” (Morrow 2002, 166). Another mentions that children’s voices have been “unheard and their experiences largely concealed in the knowledge created by sociologists, anthropologists and historians” (Thorne 2002, 1). Even in the field of early childhood studies, where children are at the very center of the discipline, “The most critical voices that are silent in our constructions of early childhood education are the children with whom we work. Our constructions of research have no fostered methods that facilitate hearing their voices (Cannella 1998, 10). And of course it is even more recently that “Girls’ Studies is coalescing as a unique and significant area of critical inquiry” (Kearney 2009, 2), because “substantial barriers to girl-centered research prevented its expansion before the end of the twentieth century” (2). It makes one wonder if we should approach the “knowledge” about children that emerges from such scholarship with the same skepticism we bring to accounts of harems written by men with no possible access to women’s quarters (Ahmed 1982), or accounts of women’s nature, needs, or knowledge, where they are spoken for and about but rarely speak in their own voices. This repeated absence is a giant red flag. Being silenced means being “left out of . . . accounts of one’s own life . . . or included in demeaning and disfiguring ways” (Lugones and Spelman 1983, 20). Just as feminists “distrust . . . the male monopoly over accounts of women’s lives” (20), so should we distrust those accounts in which children are only spoken for and about—we should in fact *expect* “demeaning and disfiguring” content. Here feminist understanding of silencing is directly applicable, as it helps makes visible and problematic the absence of children’s voices and perspectives.

Sometimes it seems that people go out of their way to insult children, almost as if it bestows some sort of legitimacy or critical eye on the rest of what they have to say. In a short online piece on curiosity, Cindy Dove praises and encourages more inquisitiveness in daily life—and then ridicules the curiosity of the young. In the spirit of full disclosure, when my kids were little and in the ‘why’ phase there were moments when I wanted to throw my hands in the air and say ‘because,’ with no room for further discussion. However, most of the time I find curiosity appealing (2012, 2).

What is noteworthy is how children are exempted from ideas about desirable and laudatory behavior, even when they are particularly associated with that quality or action, as they are with curiosity. It is as if they cannot win (again a phenomenon feminist theory recognizes as a red flag). Curiosity is good, except when children are inquisitive. Children are somehow *too* inquisitive, so that their curiosity becomes bothersome to adults, including their parents. Dove’s essay ignores the important fact that adult curiosity is often bothersome to other adults who prefer that certain matters remain closed, not to mention the burden of prying adults on children. The author seems to feel no need to defend adult intolerance when its target is pesky young people, and she ignores the perspectives of the young.

If you search “marginalization of children” online you will learn how some children marginalize other children, how certain socially marginalized children—such as street kids, or overweight kids—are more at risk for illnesses such as HIV and depression, and how social programs might successfully target marginalized kids, again, such as illiterate children, or children from hard to reach geographical areas. You simply will not find popular online discussions about the marginalization of childhood itself, or how *adults* marginalize young people, or how institutions and everyday practices exclude and demean them. Searching the “silencing of children” leads back to extreme cases: war zones, child abuse, or orphanages. There is little discussion of such ordinary, pervasive, and outrageous rules, published online and visible on classroom walls, as “Follow all directions without argument,” and “Obtain permission before speaking.”

The number and range of locations where the young are dismissed or ignored indicates that we are in the presence of a political problem. In the case of gender oppression, we have come to understand how “The real and symbolic silencing of women has a long history and is inscribed across philosophical, literary, legal, popular, cultural, natural and social science discourses” (Luke 1994, 211). The silencing of children needs to be understood as involving similarly widespread patterns of disempowerment and disrespect. Such patterns vary according to factors that include gender, age, class, and race, so that females are less heard than males, younger children more discounted than older ones, etc. But even while behaviors that challenge authority are more tolerated among, for example, “gifted” than “at risk” young people, silencing is a presence in the life of all.

Interruption of Speech and of Quietude

In focusing on “interruption,” I discuss two aspects of the practice—interference with children’s silence and with their speech. I began thinking about children and quietude when I considered that while I more often overhear adults yelling “Listen to me!” to children, I also

frequently hear “Answer me!” “Tell me!” and “Do you hear me?!” In the ordinary speech practices that contribute to women’s oppression, commands to attend and to speak do not form such major or explicit parts of the practices. The demand for response is the lack of a right to remain silent, often a requirement of self-incrimination (and often followed by immediate punishment), and a denial of privacy and personal space with daunting repercussions. The command to listen is a demand for attention, despite whatever else the child might be doing or considering; it also involves the imposition of a “correct” understanding of events, usually without hearing the child first. Reckoning with the meaning and consequences of these demands led me to think more deeply about both children’s quiet and other forms of interruption and intrusion.

Tillie Olsen explains that there are “natural silences, that necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation” (Olsen 1978, np). Too often, we deny this space to children. Yet such natural silence is easy to see in a child playing alone. They turn a toy or an empty tin can over and over in their hands; dirt repeatedly, idly drifts through their fingers; they enjoy the feel of the push and pull of waves as they sit at water’s edge; they make piles of sticks or line up their cars without haste. Despite the stereotype, kids are not actually loudly and frantically in motion all of the time, though that stereotype is frequently used to justify controlling their behavior. They can, as in these scenarios, be very present in quiet acts that require and reinforce internal calm. These periods necessitate being left alone, self-directed. And my observations in classrooms, living rooms, and playgrounds make clear that even where there is no particular need for interruption, for a variety of reasons, many adults do not like to leave children alone or undirected, preferring a role that involves interference: at best, correction, improvement, and enhancement and, at worst, surveillance and control (Garber 2010). Apparently, this situation has been of some concern to feminists for centuries, and is often more the experience of girls than of boys.

Throughout the animal kingdom ... every young creature requires almost continual exercise, and the infancy of children . . . should be passed in harmless gambols . . . without requiring very minute direction from the head, or the constant attention of a nurse. In fact, the care necessary for self-preservation is the first natural exercise of the understanding, as little inventions to amuse the present moment unfold the imagination. But . . . the child is not left a moment to its own direction, particularly a girl, and thus rendered dependent—[then] dependence is called natural (Wollstonecraft 1988 [1792], 41).

Gilman, too, notes, “To the boy we say, ‘Do’; to the girls, ‘Don’t’” (1966, 55).

As a result of interruption, children are often denied natural silences, times of renewal or gestation, even times of uninterrupted concentration. A child may resist and find these times when they are not “supposed to.” What makes us blind or indifferent to their need for quiet and solitude, and for self-direction? What does it mean to be denied such refuge and activity? Politically, if we can learn from slave narratives here, “the denial [to slaves] of a private realm,” of a “private life,” was critical in keeping them “at the constant beck and call of the master,” and in removing the conditions necessary for “expressing any independent will” (Ackelsberg and Shanley 221). There are potentially profound implications for anyone in having quite limited privacy; still, for children these effects seem *especially* dire, for two

reasons: first, their “independent will” and fundamental sense of self and others are still emergent; second, their claims against others, and attempts to set limits upon what others can demand of them, have extremely limited legitimacy. Basically, these have fewer tools for resistance and need more space for exploration.

Not just children’s silence but also their words are interrupted. On this subject, there seems to be a reasonably tidy application of gender theory to adult-child interactions. But it is still an area where including children changes what we can learn about the practice. Feminists have studied the rates at which both men and women interrupt men and women, as well as the range of purposes of interruption, from domination to cooperation. Children’s words are ridden roughshod over even more than women’s are, but the reasons for and effects of this are similar. Three points, however, merit further thought.

First, adults *regularly* and generally thoughtlessly interrupt children despite the fact that they often make a huge deal about teaching children how rude the practice is when children engage in it. This quite visible double standard, perhaps as much as the interruptions themselves, reinforces for both parties the lesser importance of the child’s voice.

Second, the interruptions—and here I speak from watching parental participation in children’s classroom meetings—often express impatience with and disrespect for the ways children speak, and the processes by which they reach decisions. Children are hardly blind to messages that they are “slow,” or even “stupid,” their language inferior or wrong. There is little burden on adults to listen harden, to translate, to wait attentively, to become fluent, or to leave open the possibility that they may learn; an assumption seems to be that “children are somehow disabled or prevented from speaking out, and that, therefore, they need a helping hand” (James 2008, 262).

Finally, the popular literature on interruption varies dramatically depending upon whether it is about adults or children interrupting. The literature on adults asks serious questions about the variety of forms and intentions of interruption, muses about its usefulness and its limits, and explores general norms of conversation, which actually allow for overlapping voices rather than only the turn-taking urged upon the young. The literature on children interrupting, however, is quite a bit less scholarly, and tends to demean the youthful interrupter. It attributes to children a narrower and negative range of motives, especially impulsiveness and self-centeredness (Rock 2015, Spicer 2010). It fails to recognize the mutuality of interruption, instead considering it a constant irritation to impeccably well-behaved parents with perfect speech etiquette, a threat to teachers’ necessary classroom order, and a challenge to civil, democratic norms of politeness. Overall, reckoning with the silencing of children will enrich our understanding of the politics of silence and voice, for these practices speak to important issues from social trust and hypocrisy to forms of voice and the institutionalization of submission.

Another kind of interruption is common and troubling in conversation with children. “From early childhood on, over the course of our cultural education, we learn to take experience as bearing on knowledge in many different ways” (Creary 2001, 375). That is, in our conversations about our experiences we gain more understanding about what happened

and why. We obtain knowledge about how the world works, and our places in it. When children are regularly interrupted, corrected, or forced only to listen, they lose their rightful role in coming to grips with their own experiences. They do not negotiate over memories or interpretations. Yet “having the opportunity to talk about one’s life, to give an account of it, to interpret it, is integral to leading that life, rather than being led through it” (Lugones and Spelman 1983, 20). Limits on children’s speech enforce their subordination to adult and to adult versions of children’s worlds.

What’s at Stake

The first thing at stake in listening virtuously and sympathetically to children is good policy, in classrooms, families, and states. It turns out, unsurprisingly, that “when they do not listen to young people, adults’ assumptions about children’s needs are frequently off the mark” (UNICEF 2002). Adults have been shown to be wrong in their estimation of what children think about or prefer on topics from playgrounds, bullying and education to sex, violence, and divorce. We should object to any policy based on incorrect assumptions, incomplete information, or flawed reasoning, and therefore resulting in ineffective or unjust practices. We should also, therefore, object to the silencing that contributes to the errors.

Second, a failure to listen to children puts children at risk. “Silencing children contributes to a world where they are victims of inequality, abuse, exploitation, poverty and fear” (UNICEF 2002). Children who speak and participate are safer, healthier, and more active. Currently we endorse what puts them at risk, whatever our intentions. As Gilman suggests, we should nurture the gradual increase of children’s empowerment. Otherwise, as Frances Wright discussed a century ago, we will “see the youth launching into life without compass or quadrant. We should not see him doubting at each emergency how to act, shifting his course with the shifting wind” (1973 [1829], 112).

A piece on some “celebrity” cases of child sexual, psychological, and physical abuse caught my attention a few years ago. Charles Blow made clear that all kinds of people are perpetrators, that children of all ages are vulnerable, and that silence damages. The final paragraph, however, reveals a general ignorance about the silencing of children.

We need a public education campaign that speaks directly to children—on Nickelodeon and Cartoon network, at the beginning of G-rated movies, on classroom bulletin boards, everywhere. Nothing graphic, just something simple: ‘If it feels wrong, it’s wrong. Say something. It’s your body’ (2009).

Surely it helps to have that message spoken more loudly from more places. But Blow assumes, contrary to everyday silencing, that when children speak, adults listen. In fact, however, adults are “not prepared to listen” to children, which “effectively render[s them] . . . inaudible.” And, most unfortunately, we have many ways to justify such incredulity, especially given common “attacks on the credibility of children” that characterize them as liars, fantasizers (Goddard and Mudaly 2006, 3-4), poor observers and thinkers, “suggestible

and acquiescent” (Lewis 2010, 14). As Gilman so rightly said, everyday silencing perpetuates more extreme forms of abuse.

Further, the idea that we usually treat children as if their bodies *are* theirs is questionable. More often, we tell them who to hug, what they may or absolutely cannot wear, and what parts of themselves they must not touch or even correctly name. We tell them to stay put, or go over there. If someone is treated almost all of the time as if they have nothing interesting to say, no credibility, no judgment, and no say over their physical selves, how will they be able to talk with confidence to a skeptical adult about the most frightening and difficult things? We deceive ourselves about how to fix things in editorials like Blow’s, and thus become complicit in keeping the young at risk.

A third consequence of the silencing of children is made visible in an article on “family discussions.” It asserts that “oftentimes the children’s suggestions involved *more* fairness and creativity than those of the parents” (Andrus 2003). Other writers defend their contributions by stating that young people “bring a different perspective and life experience that only they are capable of, one that is born of their own unique experiences and politics” (Baumgardner and Richards 2005, 51). As a rule, we should begin our interactions with children, as with adults, assuming they might well enrich the conversation and our actions, not that we are doing them a great favor by listening.

Unfortunately, rather than serving as the basis for an argument that children’s perspectives need to be represented, their “distinctiveness” has been used to disqualify them from participation, to mark them as unfit. Feminists are familiar with marking members of a sex, a caste, a race, or a religion, people with certain bodies or particular sexual preferences, as different and therefore not equipped to participate in certain activities or arenas. The argument that children, by virtue of their youth, are distinct from those already possessing a recognized claim to participate *must* not stop us from joining them in conversation, then, but should lead us to ask more questions. Is there adequate evidence to support the asserted difference, its universality, and its relation to specific social consequences? Do similarities receive as much attention? Do we overgeneralize about “youth,” or take into account similarities as well as differences among the young, from age and sex to class and religion? Are there ways to bring in those who differ, either on the same or different terms? How much is participation valued? How imaginatively have we studied the paths to and forms of participation? The fact that certain processes cannot accommodate certain people should lead us to more questions about the processes and environment than about those who fail to thrive in them.

Finally, on the level of democratic community, studies suggest that when parents show respect to their children, children learn the value of respect in sustaining democratic ideals” (Smith 2014). “Giving children opportunities to practice dialogue in a safe environment using democratic strategies, helps them learn to respect themselves and others” (Andrus 2003). Dorothy Smith insists that feminists pay more attention to dynamics in schools, because they “reproduce circles of exclusion from agency,” and thus present “a profound impairment of the democratic process in our societies” (2000, 1150). Democracy presupposes the existence of citizens who can reason well independently *and* in civil conversation. Democratic societies

must nurture such skills, in individuals, families, classrooms, and communities. The silencing of youth is deeply counter to this democratic demand.

If listening to children furthers knowledge, leads to better policies for children, keeps children safer and healthier, enhances democratic politics, and is consistent with feminist principles, we certainly need to learn how to converse better. “The case for involving children in decision-making at school and at home is clear and compelling. . . . ‘Joint decision making,’ which includes more child participation, is a predictor of higher achievement and lower misconduct across all ethnic groups . . . Opportunities to practice making decisions give one more confidence and proficiency” (Rubin and Schoenefeld 2009, 8). Research just as “unequivocally identifies the serious detrimental effects that accrue from a lack of such involvement” (8). Period.

Conclusions

Feminist theorizing helps us to see that the everyday silencing of children involves an unethical pattern of ordinary practices that effectively disempowers the young and creates models of goodness for children that incorporate destructive ideals of submissiveness, obedience, silence, and yielding to another’s will. It should go without saying that “children and young people do welcome opportunities to ‘have a say’” (Lewis 2010, 15). Given our stubborn refusal to recognize this desire and ability in children, however, most institutions as well as individuals are inexpert on figuring out how to listen to children, making them feel heard, or following practices in different areas of life that give them the greatest chance to speak and exert some influence.

When feminist political thought meets work on the silencing of children, here is what I think we can see and know: the silencing effects of the patriarchal family trickle down to children; norms of inequality are taught to them but also masked; unnecessary restrictions on children’s freedom and voice negatively impact democracy and community; practices that silence children reinforce other kinds of marginalization; we use a variety of tactics to discount what young people say; degradation in schools, families and organizations reinforce each other; violations of the body begin in babyhood itself; we discount conversation and relations between children; there are lifelong effects of the fact that we all experience inequality and injustice as children; and children try a lot of strategies to resist silencing. We need our models of participation, inclusion, voice, and respect to cover not just areas where everyone is able and adult and literate, but situations where age, among other factors, changes those dynamics but still leave us with more options than hoping a benevolent dictator appears.

In coming up with such models, we need constantly to reckon with differences among the young. Taking gender as the example, we listen better if we know that “females are more likely to blame something within themselves when they have a difficulty, while boys are more likely to blame something outside themselves,” that “because helpless behaviors are reinforced for girls, girls may be less likely to engage in assertive behaviors,” and that “one evaded topic in schools is the issue of gender and power” (Witt 2001, np). That is, we have to start where different children are, already affected mightily by socialization and destined to continue to negotiate with such things as gendered expectations.

I believe that for adults to be willing to share power with children “is, in its truest sense, a very radical agenda” (Lewis 2010, 17). It is time to tackle that agenda. If feminism really is to be “for everyone,” all forms of silencing must be contested, and change in all parties is required. It is less children who need to change, than adults and adult-child relations, and it is not only children who will benefit, but also adults, adult-child relationships, and communities. It may be especially useful to remember that children and adults have much in

common. Even seemingly unmovable distinctions are questionable; for example, instead of thinking of adults as developed and children as developing, consider that both are always “becoming,” alone and together, influencing one another and the worlds they create.^{iv}

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ⁱ My focus is on adult-child relationships in this paper, and the settings in which they mostly take place—schools and homes. While I do not tackle relationships among children here, the literature shows that they can indeed have different characteristics and serve other purposes than do adult-child relationships, but that the latter affect the former, and often take place in the same dominant institutional frames.

ⁱⁱ Most of these rules range from common to ubiquitous, from pre-school through high school. Examples of hallways rule: <http://nolachuckey.greenek12.org/?PageName=TeacherPage&Page=12&StaffID=284392> and <http://www.orange.k12.nj.us/Page/5939>; of polite speech: <http://www.gilbertschools.net/Page/20315> and <http://www.ccisd.com/Page/3308>; of bathrooms: <https://learningward.wordpress.com/culture/> and <http://www.mtnbrook.k12.al.us/cms/lib09/AL01901445/Centricity/Domain/590/Discipline%20Plan.pdf>; regarding directions: <http://www.watertowncsd.org/webpages/jakins/files/class%20and%20expectations%20bio%202011.pdf> and <http://www3.telus.net/public/lastkids/parenthandbook.pdf>; on independent work: <http://www.msmansfield.com/guidelines-and-procedures.html> and <http://www.scribd.com/doc/64681989/8th-Grade-Honors-ELA-Into-Letter-and-Syllabus#scribd>; on permission to speak: <http://gphs.sharpschool.net/cms/One.aspx?portalId=1041816&pageId=22762520> and <http://centralcity.il.schoolwebpages.com/education/staff/staff.php?sectionid=42>; of calling out: <http://loies.weebly.com/classroom.html>; on lip smacking: http://eastvalley.nsd131.org/Mr_Garbini/classroom_rules_and_expectations and <http://brightideasschool.com/ronclarkletter.pdf>; and regarding complaining: https://kb065.k12.sd.us/classroom_rules_and_expectations.htm and <https://sites.google.com/site/misskarleighstewart99/classroom-rules-and-expectations>.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are related rules even through “adult education” classes, though from high school on there is often mention of students being more “adult” now, generally meaning they are expected to self-enforce the old rules.

^{iv} I heard a talk years ago that asked how we might get young people interested in opera. It seemed to me, a non-opera goer, that the question might have been better framed as “How do we get those unexposed to opera to try it out?” Too often we use an adult-child dichotomy as a proxy for something else when a proxy is not needed or most effective and when it reinforces stereotypes. Instead, we need to take every opportunity to emphasize the common situatedness of particular adults and children, in endlessly shifting configurations, both challenging the easy dichotomy and introducing fluidity into groupings.