

— *THE* —
POWER
KIDS
& TEENS
HAVE

*RADICAL YOUTH ACTIVISM IN
THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE*

by chorui halim - antiparent.com

Being a kid in 2025 is *hard*.

I'm not going to lie, it's not looking great out here. We're facing a global wave of fascism, multiple genocides, economic crises, and climate catastrophes. Our phones give us 24/7 access to what feels like every gruesome detail. It can be hard to have hope for the future, let alone know how to work towards it. Public spaces are increasingly expensive and rarely designed with your needs in mind, but there's also a growing social and legal movement to kick you off of digital spaces too. You can't vote for the public officials who make the decisions that define your life. So much of your existence depends on the whims of the adults in your life. On top of it all, you're expected to go to school for 6.5 hours a day, 180 days of the year – not including homework or extracurriculars (which get more demanding every year), and all without pay.

I'm not saying all this to try to make you feel hopeless. I just want you to know that if you're struggling right now – if you're feeling anxious, or depressed, or stuck – it's not your fault. Things suck right now, and adults are failing you on every possible level. Your experience matters. *You* matter.

Are you wondering what you can do to help?

If your experience of childhood is anything like mine was, you might feel like there isn't much you can do to make the world better as a kid. Most political and social justice organizations don't do enough to center youth perspectives or support youth activism. Combine that with school workloads, responsibilities at home, and all the other restrictions you face on a day-to-day basis, and it's hard to know how to participate.

I definitely felt like that when I was a kid – and it wasn't until I became an adult that I realized how wrong I'd been. So I'm making this zine to try to share what I wish I'd known earlier about youth activism. **I'll cover some examples from racial and youth liberation movements in the 60s and 70s, analyze some of their shortcomings, and then give some prompts that might help you figure out your own next steps.**

Adults don't always know better than you do just because we're older. Childhood isn't always the best time of everyone's lives. You deserve the chance to have your perspective taken seriously, to build community, and to organize for your own interests – especially if you're multiply marginalized.

I promise you have options. **This is your world, too.**

Youth Organizing in Recent History

We hear all the time about the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the anti-Vietnam War protests of the 1970s. But we usually talk about adult activists or organizations of that time. The 60s and 70s were also huge for youth organizing. Young activists (teens, preteens, and even younger!) played really important roles during the civil rights movement, especially when it came to desegregation. And in the 70s, a group of teenagers in Ann Arbor set their sights on the radical notion of youth liberation. Let's take a look at the achievements of both groups, starting with the 1960s movement for racial liberation.

Youth Contributions to the Civil Rights Movement

The 1960s civil rights movement wouldn't have been *the civil rights movement* without the work of young activists. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded in April 1960, was one of the most impactful organizations in the movement. In response to the jailing of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., over 1,000 students participated in the Birmingham Children's Crusade – a school walkout during which they faced extreme police violence. The Crusade represented a turning point in the civil rights movement; the broader movement had been stuck in a period of stagnation since 1961. Afterwards, the movement regained momentum, and the federal government took legislative steps to end legal segregation.

Many more young activists participated in the movement. Ruby Bridges and the Little Rock Nine were some of the most prominent students to lead the integration of schools. The Freedom Rides of 1961 challenged the lack of enforcement of desegregation laws regarding public buses, and the vast majority of participating activists were under 30 years old. Fred Hampton led the Youth Council of the West Suburban Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in his late teens. He joined the Black Panther Party at age 20 and soon became the deputy chairman of the Illinois chapter. He established a Free Breakfast program for students and led the Rainbow Coalition, an alliance between the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, and the Young Patriots. He was assassinated by the FBI at age 21. The Black Panther Party of Chicago dissolved five years later.

Around this same time, Native American youth were also leading the Red Power Movement. The American Indian Movement (AIM) organization was formed in 1968, inspired by the Black Panthers. In 1969, over 80 Native American youth occupied Alcatraz Island – an occupation which lasted 19 months. According to writer Valeria Lannon, "Red Power stands for mass, united, militant action."

This tradition of youth organizing continues to this day. We've seen the impact of Black youth during protests against police brutality such as Ferguson and BLM. Indigenous youth continue to serve as water protectors. The encampments for Gaza on university campuses in 2023-2024 inspired mass protests nationally. While the movement for youth liberation hasn't seen a broader resurgence yet, youth activists still fight for liberation every day.

The Ann Arbor Movement

In December 1970, 15-year-old Keith Hefner and his colleagues founded an organization called Youth Liberation. The goal? To take over Ann Arbor public schools and run them in the interest of young people, not adults. Youth Liberation likened youth oppression to other systems of domination, like racism and sexism – thus, Youth Liberation was a civil rights movement like any other. They hoped to provide a blueprint to youth across the country for how to organize for their rights.

They did not end up taking over Ann Arbor public schools, but they did gain some significant achievements. They convinced their city council to get rid of discriminatory curfew laws, and they even ran a 15-year-old student as a candidate for their school board in 1972. Her name was Sonia Yaco, and despite being disqualified from the race on the basis of her age, she received 1,363 write-in votes. Her campaign influenced the formation of an alternative public high school, Community High School, later that year. Youth Liberation also became a publisher for youth rights news across the nation.

Youth Liberation had a detailed platform.¹ The demands strongly echo the objectives of other civil rights movements as well:

PLATFORM – YOUTH LIBERATION 15 POINT PROGRAM

1. WE WANT THE POWER TO DETERMINE OUR OWN DESTINY

2. WE WANT THE IMMEDIATE END OF ALL ADULT CHAUVINISM

We believe ideas should be judged on their merit and people on their wisdom or kindness. Age in itself deserves no recognition. Adults who want to support youth struggle or “improve communication” should show their concern by providing concrete resources. Words alone are not enough. Age might once have led to wisdom, but the old have proven themselves unable to deal with the present reality. If the human species is to survive, the young must take the lead.

3. WE WANT FULL CIVIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS

We believe young people are necessary participants in democracy. We must have complete freedom of speech, press, assembly, religion, and the right to vote. We believe that all people are created equal and are endowed with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

4. WE WANT THE RIGHT TO FORM OUR EDUCATION ACCORDING TO OUR NEEDS

We believe compulsory education is a form of imprisonment and must be abolished immediately. Grades and all forms of tracking must end because they stimulate competition, divide us and make us work for other people’s ends. All discipline procedures must be decided democratically within the school community. No school staff should be hired or fired without the democratic consent of students and teachers. Students and the community must have the right to use school facilities whenever they feel it is necessary.

5. WE WANT FREEDOM TO FORM INTO COMMUNAL FAMILIES

We believe that the nuclear family is not in the best interests of the people involved. Young people are now considered property – to be molded in the image

of their parents. Since we demand self-determination for our lives, this is intolerable. In communal families children can grow up in the company of many people, both peers and adults. They can learn the cooperation of community rather than the oppression of ownership. Until communal families are a reality, some healthy provision must be made for young people whose present conditions of life force them to become cultural refugees.

6. *WE WANT THE END OF MALE CHAUVINISM AND SEXISM*

We believe women must be free and equal. We recognize that sexism is all-pervasive and often subtle and demeans the humanity of everyone. All forms of sex role stereotyping must end. Macho must go. Abortions must be free and legal. We consider the women's movement our natural ally since both young people and women are systematically oppressed by male supremacist society.

7. *WE WANT THE OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE AN AUTHENTIC CULTURE WITH INSTITUTIONS OF OUR OWN MAKING*

We believe western culture is decadent and we refuse to continue it in our lives. People's appearance must not affect their civil rights. All drugs must be legalized, as we see that it is not laws which govern people's use of drugs, but societal conditions. We hope to create a society in which people will not need death drugs. Our music and cultural gatherings must be allowed to flourish in peace. We must be set free to begin living in the new age and begin to accept a responsibility for developing plans and examples of institutions that build joy, justice, and a respect for life.

8. *WE WANT SEXUAL SELF-DETERMINATION*

We believe all people must have the unhindered right to be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or trans-sexual.

9. *WE WANT THE END OF CLASS ANTAGONISM AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE*

We believe those in power cultivate elitism and class divisions among youth which only serve to weaken us. The survival of young people of all classes and races is threatened by the few who run this world. We condemn academic tracking, honors, and all other class divisions imposed on us.

10. *WE WANT THE END OF RACISM AND COLONIALISM IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE WORLD*

We believe America is an imperialist country. America uses over 50 percent of the world's resources for less than 7 percent of the world's population. Racism in schools is several damaging to students, particularly minority students. Students must eliminate racism and stop fighting each other. We must unite to fight the real enemy until we have education that meets the needs of all races. We support the liberation struggles of colonized people of all colors everywhere.

11. *WE WANT FREEDOM FOR ALL UNJUSTLY IMPRISONED PEOPLE*

All young people in juvenile homes, training schools, detention centers, mental institutions and other penal institutions for minors must be set free. They did not

receive a trial before a jury of their peers and the society they offended is itself criminal. Young people must never receive discriminatory treatment before the law, whether in the courtroom, going to a movie, buying alcohol, or leaving home. The military draft must be abolished and the military made democratic.

12.WE WANT THE RIGHT TO BE ECONOMICALLY INDEPENDENT OF ADULTS

We believe we are entitled to work or to unemployment benefits. Child labor laws and extended schooling now force youth into the status of a dependent colony.

13.WE WANT THE RIGHT TO LIVE IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

We believe that to survive we must have clean air to breathe, pure food to eat, water fit to drink, products built to last, free medical care, and an end to population growth. Life exists in balance and harmony but greed and stupidity have now sent us disastrously out of balance with our environment and ecological degradation is building momentum. Each person must learn to live a sound ecological life and all people together must change the economic structure of the world until the needs of the earth and its people are met.

14.WE WANT TO RE-HUMANIZE EXISTENCE

We believe that to do this we must recognize and deal with the invisible dictatorship of technocracy and bureaucracy. We are the crown of creation and we announce that it is not our destiny to become robot parts of the Great Machine.

15.WE WANT TO DEVELOP COMMUNICATION AND SOLIDARITY WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF THE WORLD IN OUR COMMON STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM AND PEACE

We believe national boundaries are artificial and must inevitably be abolished. In the new world, all resources and technology must be used for the benefit of all people.

Unfortunately, the organization dissolved in 1979, and the national movement did not gain much traction. Keith Hefner went on to become the founder and executive director of Youth Communication, a journalism and publishing program for New York City teens. In 1988, he wrote a retrospective² about his experience running Youth Communication (formerly New Youth Connections), where he detailed the challenges of maintaining such an organization.

Why Did The Youth Liberation Movement Fall Apart?

To plan a successful liberation movement, we need to analyze previous efforts. Activists of the past have a lot to teach us regardless of whether they achieved all their goals at the time. The Youth Liberation movement in 1970s Ann Arbor is still the best-known and most coordinated effort against child oppression in modern US history. From all the information I've been able to piece together about this movement, here are my major takeaways about its shortcomings.

On Child Oppression

Child oppression is *weird*. In most societies around the world, it's the most intense form of marginalization. But at the same time, it's the only oppression that is inherently temporary. Not everyone survives youth oppression, but for everyone who does, there's a clear end date for the worst aspects of it.

This makes youth oppression incredibly hard to organize against. Even when children understand that the way they're being treated is wrong, most of them choose to age out instead of fight it collectively. Those who try to organize are met with a crushing level of denial from the rest of society. Hardly anyone else treats youth oppression as a serious issue worth fighting – including other marginalized people. Even most children don't think of their mistreatment as structural oppression; they tend to focus on dynamics of interpersonal abuse and try to deal with it on an individual basis.

The family form plays a dual role of care and coercion, which also complicates the fight for youth liberation. Through their families, children receive food, shelter, medical care, emotional support, and love. We don't have an adequate system in place to help children access those resources outside of the family. In fact, leveraging those needs is how the family form maintains total power over children! Youth liberation activists are generally well aware of that fact, but it nonetheless does present a chicken-and-egg problem. We need to organize for better systems because children have no way to get their needs met anywhere else, but in organizing for better systems, children often risk their existing access to resources. Most young people understandably draw the conclusion that it's easier to just wait to turn 18.

Maintaining the Movement

The ability to age out presents another issue: the high level of turnover makes it difficult to maintain momentum. By the time young people are able to articulate and organize against their oppression, they're often already in their teens. That gives 5 years (at most) before they hit the age of majority. Effective liberation movements need to sustain themselves for decades, if not *centuries*.

Successful movements maintain themselves through the flow of knowledge from generation to generation. This involves knowledge generation such as running studies, creating records/documentation, or writing books. But it also involves older members training younger members one-on-one or in small groups. When the flow is interrupted, that knowledge is easily lost. Instead of being able to learn from previous efforts, activists are stuck reinventing the wheel.

We're seeing this happen with anticapitalist activism in the US today. Because of how thoroughly unions in the US have been decimated since the 1980s, workers often struggle to organize against their employers. Because Americans grow up so thoroughly steeped in anticommunist propaganda, most can't articulate even the most basic mechanics of class oppression.

But at least for workers, there are organizations like the [IWW](#) that exist to support people through the process of organizing their workplaces. Children have *no* such infrastructure. There isn't a single major political, legal, or social body that represents the interests of children in the US today. There isn't any organization that reaches out to children to make them aware of the history of the struggle against their oppression. There isn't even any general awareness of the nature of their oppression in the past or the present. Every youth liberation effort – especially pre-internet – had to reinvent the wheel.

Building Coalitions

Though Youth Liberation's 15-point platform echoed the struggles for Black, LGBT, and feminist liberation, I couldn't find any records of them working with other organizations in pursuit of those struggles. On the other hand, many civil rights organizations have youth chapters, but they're generally focused on fighting some other type of oppression.

This is a major weakness of the movement. When youth activists are relegated to youth chapters of other orgs, they don't get to dedicate themselves wholly to fighting for their own interests. But when youth activists are siloed in their own orgs with no connections to other movements, they also don't get to collaborate on a greater regional or national strategy. When the org falls apart, there's no one left to fight for the cause.

What We Can Improve

A successful youth liberation movement needs to **account for the unique nature of child oppression**. It needs to focus on building systems of material support for children beyond the family, so that when potential participants are weighing the risks of contributing to the effort, they know they'll have a safety net to fall back on. It needs to build legitimacy – if not within mainstream society, then at least within activist spaces.

The movement needs to **build and maintain a knowledge base**, as well as **make it available to as many young people as possible**. The internet makes the first part of this task vastly easier. But the second part (marketing, essentially) is still a lot of work. Since children are so strictly separated from public life offline, the work of physically distributing materials (zines, reading lists, manifestos, etc.) is best done by young people themselves. But the rest of the tasks have plenty of room for collaboration between young activists and allied adults – which I believe will ultimately make the system more robust. We actually have a lot to learn from capitalist organizations regarding knowledge management, since many of them have put decades of work into figuring out the best way to sustain themselves long-term.

Another crucial aspect of maintaining the movement is **coalition building**. We cannot win without it. Especially in a movement with turnover this high, we *need* to be building ways to scale up the impact of our work. And, given the highly isolated nature of modern childhood, I think that coalition building is the most effective way to introduce our analysis of child oppression into the mainstream.

Youth liberation is a critical fight. Every other structure of oppression relies on the indoctrination of youth to reproduce itself. We're not going to be able to dismantle sexism until we stop forcing the violence of hierarchical gender on children. Worker oppression won't end until we understand how capitalism uses children to sustain itself generationally. So in order to fully deconstruct relationships of domination, **every fight for liberation must also adopt a youth liberationist lens**.

Similarly, **youth liberation must be a goal within a broader fight towards socialism and communism**. The oppression of children doesn't occur in a vacuum; it happens for specific economic and political reasons. So it follows that we won't be able to dismantle it unless we're also working to destroy the structures that incentivize it. Children are kept in an extended disempowered state so that they come out the other side as compliant workers and citizens. If we attempt to liberate youth while keeping capitalism intact, what we'll produce *at best* is a generation of people who both struggle to function under capitalism and are unable to mount an organized movement against it.

At the end of the day, building this movement is a balancing act. The central problem, I think, is **balancing the need for a youth-led movement versus the need for lasting infrastructure**. Young people face overwhelming isolation as well as an utter lack of (legal, social, political, economic) power in society – these are significant hurdles to overcome while getting a mass movement off the ground. To be able to connect young people with each other as well as their radical history, some level of collaboration is necessary between youth and more experienced activists. But if we all approach this effort in a thoughtful and coordinated way, if we're willing to take risks, and if we're willing to honestly evaluate and work on the shortcomings of our movement, *I really think we can win*.

What Can You Do?

As a young person, you face a uniquely difficult set of circumstances. But despite all the restrictions you face legally, politically, economically, and socially, you can still build power by organizing with other people. You need to figure out for yourself what you want to achieve through collective action, but here's a little worksheet to help you get started.

What issues do you care about?

Pick one of the things you wrote above. What are some organizations in your area working in that field right now?

What are they doing right?

What can they improve on?

Were there any historical movements trying to address this issue?

What did they achieve?

How/why did they fail?

What are some projects you can work on in this field? How would they help?

Are any existing organizations doing similar projects? If so, how could you join them?

What skills do you have that could help?

What do you need to improve on to be able to do your best work?

What resources do you have access to?

What's getting in your way? What kind of support do you need?

Resources

Youth Liberation

1. <https://web.archive.org/web/20250810032125/https://www.youthliberation.com/index.php/platform/>
2. <https://web.archive.org/web/20001003102423/http://www.youthcomm.org/Documents/Evolution.htm>
3. https://web.archive.org/web/20070701073929/http://www.wcstonefnd.org/pdfs/spotlight_hefner.pdf
4. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/youth-liberation-movement>
5. <https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/the-possibilities-for-child-liberation>
6. https://web.archive.org/web/20060821174944/https://www.youthlib.com/generator/archives/2005/10/the_history_of.html
7. Holt, John C. (1974) *Escape from Childhood* Boston: E. P. Dutton.
<https://archive.org/details/EscapeFromChildhood/mode/2up>

1960s Civil Rights Movement

8. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/youth-in-the-civil-rights-movement/>
9. <https://dallasexaminer.com/civil-rights-movement-students/>
10. <https://ldfreollection.org/stories/student-activists-lead-in-the-fight-for-civil-rights/>
11. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1150867899>
12. <https://daily.jstor.org/a-century-of-black-youth-activism/>
13. <https://redpowermedia.wordpress.com/category/red-power-movement/>

About the Author

chorui halim writes about childhood, parenting, history, and youth liberation at antiparent.com. chorui has always been passionate about children; they grew up taking care of the children in their community as well as working as a freelance supplemental educator for well over a decade. They are in their late 20s with 2 children of their own. Their own experience with child abuse, disability, feminist and LGBT issues, and racial marginalization convinced them of the need to develop a holistic approach to understanding children's oppression. They are also a former NASA engineer.

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