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As We Enter 2020, Let's be the Change Our Children Need

By **Katie Philp**
UCF Forum columnist
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Today's teens and young adults are doing everything we've encouraged them to do; so why are we uneasy with their passion, drive and anger on issues?



Change is coming and waxing nostalgic won't bring back the past. Nor can we force modern youth to fit our ideals of yesterday. (Photo by Chris Lawton at Unsplash)

We've all seen it. It's on T-shirts, coffee mugs, bumper stickers and journal covers. As an educator, I most often encounter it in email signatures and on posters hung conspicuously at the front of classrooms. Whether scrawled in a childish, pastel-colored

font or accompanied by a stock photo of a man standing on a mountain, his arms raised triumphantly in the glow of the setting sun, it is nearly always positioned to grab attention. Indeed, this mantra seems to have permeated schools and educational settings across our country:

“Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Frequently attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, there are [doubts](#) over the true origins of this quote. Regardless, as inspirational sound bites go, this one has some teeth. Short and succinct, it imparts a strong message of personal agency in just a few syllables. This one line conveys determination, hard work, optimism, and maybe a little bit of pluck.

In the past decade, we’ve witnessed teens and young adults using social media platforms to communicate and make their voices heard louder and faster than ever before.

Youth activism is not new, but in the [past decade](#), we’ve witnessed teens and young adults using social media platforms to communicate and make their voices heard louder and faster than ever before. While we were busy fighting the ‘[Ok, Boomer](#)’ war, younger generations grew tired and got to work. They have seen our inspirational posters and they have raised us a few million Tweets. Today’s teens are doing everything we’ve encouraged them to do and more; so why are we suddenly uneasy with their passion, their drive and their anger? Why do I hear calls to “let them be kids” or worse, to just “go to a good old-fashioned movie”?

Some of this comes from a misguided sense of protection from adults (while some, clearly, does not). Many of us recall a time when being a teen was more carefree, a time when we could readily afford to just “be kids.” But that time is gone. Waxing nostalgic won’t bring it back, nor will forcing modern youth to fit our ideals of yesterday. When we teach current events and encourage critical thinking, we cannot, in the same breath, urge them to put down the internet and go play outside.

Young people today are steadfast in the belief that they should not live in fear of being shot at school, being harassed or harmed for the color of their skin or whom they choose to love, or of a rapidly warming planet on the brink of an irreversible tipping point. So they are taking what we have taught them and they are doing something about it. Today’s youth have heard us loud and clear — they are being the change they wish to see.

I do not fear for the [Greta Thunbergs](#), the [Emma Gonzalezes](#), the [David Hoggs](#) or the [Malala Yousafzais](#) of the world. They have shown us that they are resilient, brave and relentless. However, I do fear that the shouting, name-calling, and outright bullying by those in power targeting high-profile teens could deter other youth from speaking out. Their voices are important in these conversations, when the decisions we make today will most heavily impact them tomorrow. That’s why it is important for adults to take a stand, to add our support and encouragement to youth who want to get involved with causes that matter to them.

As we enter 2020, let's look with fresh eyes at the young people around us and really try to hear them. Let's acknowledge their fears, their pain, and the heavy burdens we have allowed them to carry alone. Let's finally start to be the change our young people need. Because they aren't waiting around any longer for us to catch up.

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