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### Stop Infantilizing Disabled People

What are the things that come to mind when you see a person in a wheelchair? Some thoughts that come to mind might be that they are weak, innocent, in need of your help, and different. Most able-bodied people tend to treat people with disabilities differently because they have formed subconscious biases about them. It is often forgotten that disabled people are in fact, people. They are human beings first and foremost and often act, think, and navigate the world similarly to abled-bodied people. When people neglect to acknowledge this, they often start treating disabled people as if they are naive children who are incapable of having adult conversations and experiences. Even though people do not always have malicious intentions when addressing people with disabilities as if they are unfledged, the infantilization of members of this community must come to an end. It significantly harms the development of the disabled community, causes long-term mental health issues for them, and it is a form of ableism that further solidifies the idea that disabled people are not “normal.”


Infantilization is the act of treating an adult like a child even though their mental and physical states do not require such treatment. This is a dehumanizing act that completely disregards the experiences and mental capacity of adults. The disrespectful act of infantilization is especially prevalent in the disabled community. Charlie Knight, a disabled activist, said in a Twitter post, “treat us like you would anyone else- not as broken, not as a freak show, not as a child. All it takes is basic respect and acknowledgment that we’re people too.” (Knight). Once it



is acknowledged that disabled adults are the same as able-bodied adults, the issue of infantilization naturally diminishes.


The issue of infantilization can critically hinder the development of disabled adults. Extreme coddling of disabled adults, especially by their parents, can make it more difficult for them to adapt to the challenges of adulthood. Treating them like children makes it almost impossible for them to experience and learn things that are crucial for adults to learn. These experiences that disabled people miss out on include, learning to manage money, navigating relationships, choosing religious practices, receiving higher education, and much more. Finn Gardiner, a disabled activist, and educator discussed the damage of infantilization in a blog post. He quoted another disabled rights activist, Cal Montgomery in the following quote, “Allowing disabled people the right to experience ‘dignity of risk’, or allowing them to try new things and potentially fail at them or learn from their mistakes...Young people of all ages should have the opportunity to learn what works and what doesn’t work for them.” (Gardiner). It is crucial that every person experiences adulthood in their own unique way, and that they learn from trial and error. This is an important part of life that is taken away from disabled people because others assume they are unfit to act and be treated like adults.

Treating disabled people as if they are children can also be detrimental to their mental health. Infantilizing people is an undermining and dehumanizing act that can cause a myriad of mental stability issues. Joy Youell, a mental health researcher, discusses this issue in an article written for a therapy platform. Youell states, “It undermines their individuality, marginalizing their abilities, thoughts, feelings, and actions. Over time, the internal levels of doubt can become paralyzing, leading to depression or anxiety,” (Youell). She explains how infantilization leads to self-loathing which can make it significantly more difficult for disabled people to function and



live happily. Anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem are only a few issues that stem from infantilization, so it is important everyone is educated on this topic and takes the necessary steps to stop it altogether.

Infantilizing disabled adults is a form of ableism that coincides with the misconception that disabled people are not “normal” people. Ableism is the discrimination against people with disabilities, the belief that people with disabilities are inferior, or in need of being fixed. Elizabeth Wright, a disabled activist, Paralympian, and writer, discusses her personal experiences with being infantilized in a recent article. She writes, “It [infantilization] happens when you see or find out that the person you are interacting with has a disability of some kind. It is a form of ableism that is part of the social structures that we live in.” (Wright). She then goes on to discuss how people are often surprised when disabled people express themselves and engage in conversations, or when they reveal to have significant others (Wright). Their shock is a result of the internalized ableist ideals imposed by society. It is often easy for able-bodied people to forget that disabled adults function similarly to them. Disabled people do not need to be treated differently just because they look or act “differently” compared to able people. Charles Catherine, a blind Paralympian, discusses how having separate Paralympic and Olympic games is ableist and pushes the idea that disabled people need to be treated differently. Separating the games is a subtle form of infantilization because it is assumed that disabled athletes do not have the capacity to compete alongside able-bodied athletes. Catherine states in his article written for *USA Today*, “In some ways, this separate competition feels like a sideshow, a reflection of a painful reality: we still think of disability as something other.” (Catherine). Acts like excluding disabled people from certain activities, or treating them like they are incapable, are forms of infantilizing that take away part of their autonomy.



It can be argued that treating people with disabilities differently is not inherently bad and can have good intentions. While I agree that most people do not have malicious intentions when infantilizing disabled people, it is still extremely harmful. People often think the best way to approach disabled people is to always be gentle, nice, and speak in simple ways as if they are interacting with a child. My older brother is disabled and handicapped. He has expressed to me multiple times how much it frustrates him when he gets treated like a child even though he is a 24-year-old adult. He says it is dehumanizing and that it makes him feel as if he is not seen as a human being. Most of the time he is being infantilized by close friends and family members, who claim that they are just trying to be nice when asked to stop. Able-bodied people may think this is the best way to act towards people with disabilities, but it is actually the opposite. In almost all cases, disabled people prefer to be treated as equals to their able-bodied counterparts.

The infantilization of disabled adults is a serious, relevant issue that damages their ability to live full-fledged lives. Treating handicapped adults like helpless, naive children dehumanizes them and imposes ableist beliefs. Addressing disabled adults in the same manner as any other adult is the best way to communicate and act towards them. People with disabilities should not be patronized and treated as less than human beings because of their conditions. The act of infantilizing adults with disabilities needs to stop immediately so we can create a more inclusive world, where disabled people can live to their full extent.



Work Cited:

Catherine, Charles. "Why a Separate Paralympics Should End and a Unified Olympic Games Should Begin." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 15 Aug. 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/08/15/why-unified-olympics-should-replace-paralympics-column/3362822001/>.

Knight, Charlie. *Twitter*, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/CKnightWrites>.

Youell, Joy. "The Causes and Symptoms of Infantilization." *BetterHelp*, BetterHelp, 18 Feb. 2018, <https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/general/the-causes-and-symptoms-of-infantilization/>.



Annotations:

Gardiner, Finn. "Parents, Do Not Infantilise Your Teenage and Adult Disabled Children."

*Parents, Do Not Infantilise Your Teenage and Adult Disabled Children* ~, 19 June 2018,

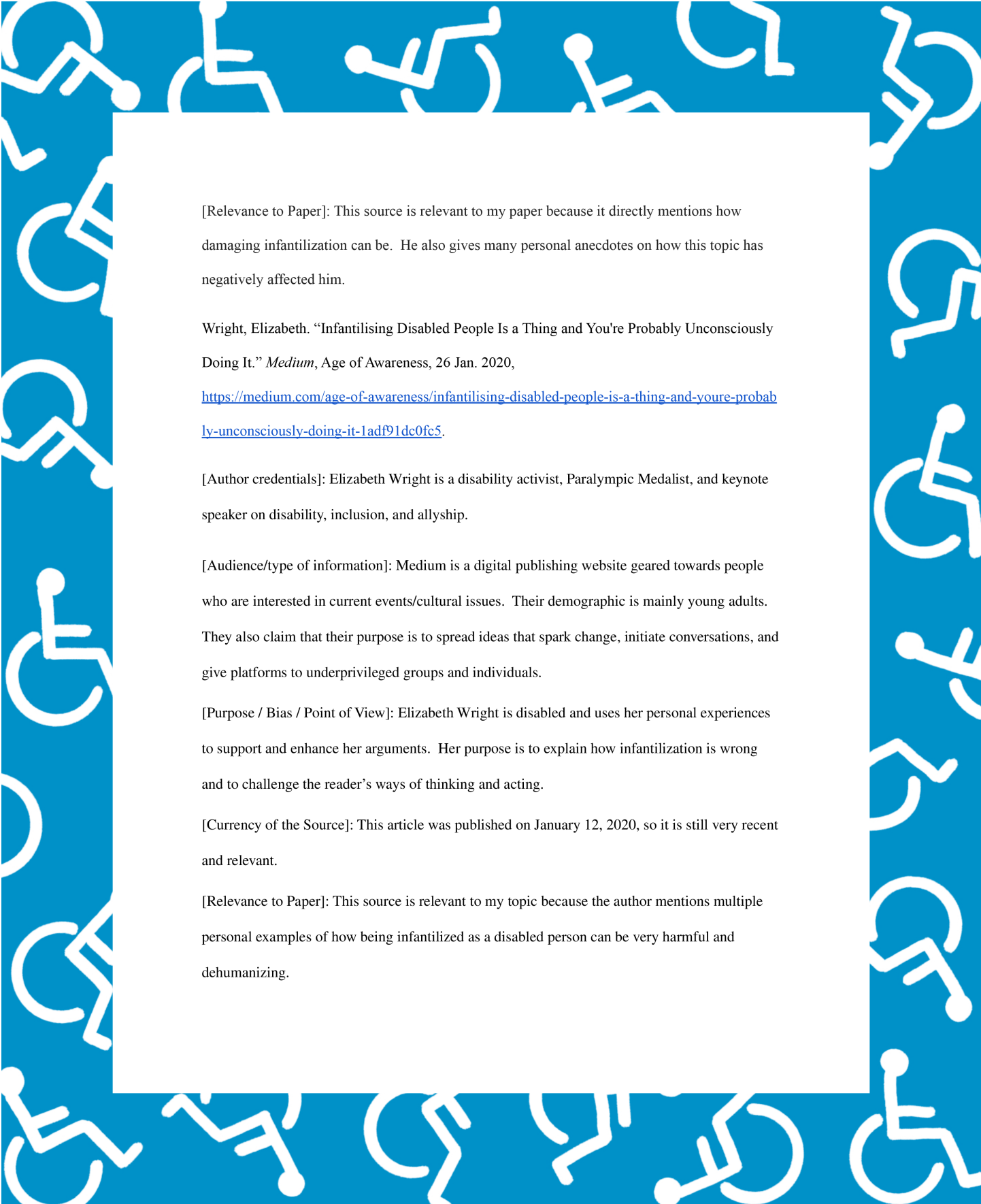
<https://homipoad.blogspot.com/2018/06/parents-do-not-infantilise-your-teenage.html>.

[Author credentials]: Finn Gardiner has a bachelor's degree in sociology from Tufts University and a Master's of Public Policy degree from the Heller School for Social Policy and Management. He is a disabled rights activist who advocates for inclusivity, equity, and justice for all disabled people.

[Audience/type of information]: This piece of text is from an online blog posted by Finn Gardiner. The intended audience for this blog in particular is people with disabilities, people who are close with disabled people, and people who want to learn more about his unique experiences. His blog also contains information on other cultural issues such as race, politics, and technology.

[Purpose / Bias / Point of View]: Gardiner is also disabled so he has first-hand knowledge of what it is like to be treated like a child even though he is a mature adult. He has a very strong stance about this topic and goes into detail as to why infantilization is detrimental. His purpose is to explain how it can be dehumanizing and disrespectful to treat people with disabilities like they are children just because of their condition.

[Currency of the Source]: This blog post was published on June 17, 2021, and it is still an ongoing issue. This source was only posted a few months ago so it is evident that this topic is still prominent.



[Relevance to Paper]: This source is relevant to my paper because it directly mentions how damaging infantilization can be. He also gives many personal anecdotes on how this topic has negatively affected him.

Wright, Elizabeth. "Infantilising Disabled People Is a Thing and You're Probably Unconsciously Doing It." *Medium*, Age of Awareness, 26 Jan. 2020,  
<https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/infantilising-disabled-people-is-a-thing-and-youre-probably-unconsciously-doing-it-1adf91dc0fc5>.

[Author credentials]: Elizabeth Wright is a disability activist, Paralympic Medalist, and keynote speaker on disability, inclusion, and allyship.

[Audience/type of information]: Medium is a digital publishing website geared towards people who are interested in current events/cultural issues. Their demographic is mainly young adults. They also claim that their purpose is to spread ideas that spark change, initiate conversations, and give platforms to underprivileged groups and individuals.

[Purpose / Bias / Point of View]: Elizabeth Wright is disabled and uses her personal experiences to support and enhance her arguments. Her purpose is to explain how infantilization is wrong and to challenge the reader's ways of thinking and acting.

[Currency of the Source]: This article was published on January 12, 2020, so it is still very recent and relevant.

[Relevance to Paper]: This source is relevant to my topic because the author mentions multiple personal examples of how being infantilized as a disabled person can be very harmful and dehumanizing.