



GLOBAL  
CAMPAIGN  
TO COMBAT  
AGEISM



INITIATING A CONVERSATION ABOUT

**AGEISM**

# INTRODUCTION

## ***What is ageism, and why is it an important issue?***

Ageism is present in the way we think, feel and act towards others and ourselves according to age, whether we are conscious of it or not. It is everywhere, in our institutions, relationships and ourselves. Different cultures have different attitudes towards age and ageing, but none is free of age bias. We know today that half the world's population is ageist towards older people and, in Europe, ageism is more prevalent against younger people than other age groups.

Ageism harms us individually and collectively, affecting our health and well-being and costing society billions of dollars. Fortunately, ageism can be combatted, but collective action is needed to raise awareness and address this issue.

## ***Why have conversations about ageism?***

Dialogue is a powerful way to engage in things that matter to us. Continued, open conversations can help us acknowledge the myths and stereotypes that we have all internalized during a lifetime, recognize ageism when we encounter it and understand that ending discrimination requires collective action. Challenging assumptions and attitudes is the first step for thriving at any age and for communities to tap the potential of all its members. Conversations also encourage the kinds of personal and political transformations that are necessary to create a world for all ages.

## ***What is the goal of this guide, and who is it for?***

Conversations are like drops of water. Just as one drop of water can create countless ripples, one conversation can have countless effects on those involved and their networks. The goal of this conversation guide is to provide easy ways to multiply the number and potential of conversations.

This guide is for everyone. It is designed to help you start a conversation about ageism [at home](#), [at work](#), [in the classroom](#) or [in the policy-making space](#).

# A CONVERSATION WITH YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

A conversation about ageism can happen at any time. You might bring the topic up after experiencing ageism yourself or being a witness to the experiences of others. The topic might come up spontaneously after you hear an ageist remark or receive a birthday card that makes fun of your age or see a movie that stereotypes older or younger people. Whatever the context, this guide can help you have a conversation about ageism – a topic that affects you and your family and friends.

## *Know your stuff.*

### **Ageism has different aspects, and it affects us all**

- Ageism refers to how we think (stereotypes), feel (prejudice) and act (discrimination) towards others or ourselves according to age.
- Ageism affects people of all ages.

### **Ageism is everywhere**

- Globally, one in two people are ageist against older people, and, in Europe, ageism is more prevalent against younger than older people.
- Ageism exists in our institutions, our relationships and ourselves.
- Ageism intersects and exacerbates other forms of disadvantage, including those related to sex, race and disability.

### **Ageism is harmful**

- Ageism has far-reaching impacts on all aspects of our health and well-being when we're older.
  - It is associated with earlier death.
  - It is linked to poorer physical and mental health, including the onset of depression.
  - It increases risky health behaviour (e.g. eating an unhealthy diet, smoking).
  - It is associated with a lower quality of life.
  - It increases social isolation and loneliness.
- The way we think about our own ageing will impact our health and well-being when we're older.
- Ageism takes a heavy economic toll on individuals and society.



## **Ageism can be combatted.**

- Policy and law can address discrimination and inequality on the basis of age and protect the human rights of everyone, everywhere.
- Educational activities can transmit knowledge and skills and enhance empathy and understanding about ageing.
- Intergenerational interventions can contribute to the mutual understanding and cooperation of different generations.

## **Key resources:**

- Global report on ageism - [Full report](#)
- Global report on ageism - [Executive summary](#)
- Global report on ageism - [Infographic](#)

## ***Initiate the conversation.***

Some questions you may wish to consider to start a conversation with your family and/or friends include:

- When do you recall first noticing age differences?
- Think of a situation in which you wanted to know a person's age. Why? What changed when you learnt it?
- How do you feel about telling people your age?
- Has anyone told you: "You don't look your age"? If so, how did this make you feel?
- What does the word "ageism" mean to you? Have you heard it before?

## ***Meet people where they are.***

Self-reflection is the key to self-awareness: it allows us to evaluate and process what we've experienced and to examine our thoughts, feelings and actions. It is important to know when people can move a conversation forward. Some key questions to consider.

- Do you think ageism exists in the world?
- Where do you notice ageism in your life (e.g. personal life, career, school, hospital)?
- What beliefs about age and ageing do you have?
- Have you ever experienced a situation in which your age seemed to contribute to a problem or uncomfortable situation?
- Have you ever witnessed someone being treated unfairly because of their age? If so, how did you respond? How did it make you feel?

- What have you heard others say about your age or other people's age? How did that make you feel? How did it impact your perspective, including your thoughts, feelings and actions towards others and towards yourself?
- Do you think ageism exists within your family and community?
- Can you give an example of how younger and older people are respected in your community? Can you give an example of how younger and older people are not respected in your community?
- What feelings, thoughts or reflections do you have at this moment with regard to age? To yourself? Your family? Your community?
- What do you think of the term "anti-ageing"?
- How do you relate to people younger or older than yourself?
- How have external factors influenced your thinking about ageism? People, media, etc.?
- If you have children, do they think differently about age than you did when you were a child?
- How do you think attitudes have changed since your parents were your age? What has stayed the same?

### ***Set the context.***

Bring people into the conversation by establishing why it matters. Some questions to consider

- Why is it important to talk about ageism?
- What is happening in the world today that makes it important not to be ageist against people older or younger than ourselves?
- What is it about ageism that worries you the most?
- Where do you think your country is on the journey towards ending ageism?
- From the discussion so far, what have you learnt from others?
- What do we agree about? Where do we differ? Why?

### ***Envision a world for all ages.***

A vision is an image of hope for the future. Having a vision helps to keep us moving forward and move through obstacles.

- If we were living in a world for all ages, what kinds of things would we see, hear or feel in our family and in our community?
- What have you seen that gives you hope?

## ***Encourage ongoing reflection and action.***

It is helpful to close a conversation by empowering people to act, providing the space for reflection about what each person can do to help create a world for all ages. Consider the following questions:

- What can we do to make our family and community more aware of ageism?
- What one action is each of us willing to take to make a difference?
- What are some of the factors that can help or prevent us from acting to address ageism in our family and community?
- How can we connect with others and continue the conversation?

You can also use some prompts for a conversation about ageism, such as:

- ageist birthday cards
- ageist cartoon vignettes
- ageist films or series
- ageist proverbs, such as:
  - “Old age is a disease that you die from.”
  - “Old age devours your youth.”
  - “The woman who tells her age is either too young to have anything to lose or too old to have anything to gain.”
  - “Age is a sorry travelling companion.”
  - “The old age of an eagle is better than the youth of a sparrow.”
  - “Old age cures us of our youth.”

# A CONVERSATION WITH YOUR EMPLOYER AND COLLEAGUES

Ageism occurs throughout our working lives and throughout the work cycle. It affects both older and younger people and is damaging to individuals and social cohesion. Ageism makes it harder for younger people to enter the job market and harder for older people to remain employed and to find a new job if they are laid off. Older people may be seen as less productive or more resistant to change, and younger adults may be perceived as inexperienced or unable to make autonomous decisions.

Does your organization understand what ageism is, and how and why to address it? You can use this guide to initiate a conversation about ageism in your workplace, either with just a few colleagues or a broader discussion that involves your supervisor, department or even the entire organization. If your organization is already providing training on inclusion or unconscious bias, perhaps you could suggest use of this guide to make sure that ageism is also addressed.

This will help your co-workers understand ageism as a form of conscious and unconscious bias that can affect important decisions: from recruitment to training, to age-segregated teams. A conversation can also encourage self-reflection and thoughtful action on the part of both individual employees and the organization.

## *Understanding ageism*

This section is designed to introduce people to ageism and help set up the wider discussion. To encourage participation, ask people to write down any thoughts on a post-it note and post it on a wall. For example, you could write the definition of ageism provided below and ask people to write down how they relate to it. Consider the following questions:

- How often do you think about people's age in your day-to-day life? When and why does it come up?
- Do you think about your age in relation to work?
- How would you personally define "ageism"?
- What are the benefits of age diversity in an organization?
- How has the age composition of our organization or sector changed over time?

- Is our organization age diverse? Is it diverse in other ways? Why or why not?

**Key messages to support the discussion:**

- Ageism involves stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination towards others or ourselves on the basis of age.
- Ageism can affect people of any age.
- Ageism can play out in subtle ways, and it exists in our institutions, our relationships and ourselves.

***Reflecting about ageism***

This section moves the discussion from the big picture to the specific. It offers people the opportunity to share their experiences of ageism and for others to witness its impacts on people they know. Participants may wish to focus on experiences in the organization or elsewhere. Some questions to consider:

- Where do you see ageism in your life? and at work?
- Have you been treated differently because of your age?
- Have you seen someone else being treated differently because of their age?
- Do you think those incidents were unusual or commonplace? Why?
- Have you been discriminated against at work or been treated differently from others because of your age?
- Who do you think is more likely to experience ageism? Why?
- Do you think experiencing ageism is the result only of interpersonal interactions? Could systemic or institutional forces be at work?
- Do you think interpersonal interactions reflect broader social attitudes? In what way? and why?

**Key messages to support the discussion:**

- Attitudes about a person's competence and their organizational "fit" are often related to age.
- Ageism in the workplace affects older and younger people more than other age groups.
- Examples of ageism in the work cycle include basing recruitment decisions on the age of candidates, limiting opportunities for training or access to managerial positions on the basis of age and not on competence or enforcing mandatory retirement at a particular age.
- Institutional decisions based on age deny people power, opportunities or resources.



- Perceived age discrimination at work can lead to subsequent long-term sick leave.
- Poor performance of older adults in workplace assessments of cognitive functioning may be due partly to exposure to negative stereotypes.
- People may fail to recognize the existence of institutional ageism because it may be embedded in the organization's long-standing rules, norms and practices, which employees have never thought to question.
- Disparate outcomes in individuals' access to jobs or training opportunities may be indicators of institutional ageism.

### ***Thinking about possible solutions***

This section helps participants to reflect on specific actions that can be taken to address ageism. Participants can discuss strategies that have proven effective and reflect on which to engage in. For example, they may suggest language that can be used to challenge interpersonal ageism effectively. The discussion may involve critical reflection about existing organizational processes or the organization's overall approach to ageism. Some probing questions include:

- What would a non-ageist organization look like?
- What sort of language can make a difference in tackling ageism?
- What do you think stops people from intervening when they see ageism?
- How do you think people who witness ageism could be encouraged and empowered to act against it?
- Does the organization have any systems in place to deal with cases of ageism? Why or why not?

### **Key messages to support the discussion:**

- Three strategies have been shown to work in addressing ageism: policy and law, education, and activities that bring together people of different generations. All of these are possible in the workplace. For example, programmes can nurture intergenerational contact in the workplace, educational workshops can help challenge unconscious bias, and zero tolerance to ageist policies can help eliminate ageism at work by providing norms about ageist jokes, ensuring equal opportunities for training, etc.

## ***Committing to action***

Wrap up the conversation by asking participants to reflect on what they personally could do to challenge ageism in the workplace, and how their employers could address it. Consider the following questions:

- What is one thing that each of us could do to challenge ageism?
- What should the leaders of this organization be aware of after this conversation? What actions would we like them to take?
- How could we support a company-wide anti-ageism initiative?
- Would the organization benefit from having a working group to keep the conversation on ageism going and coordinate further action?

### **Key resources:**

- Global report on ageism - [Full report](#)
- Global report on ageism - [Executive summary](#)
- Global report on ageism - [Infographic](#)

# A CONVERSATION WITH YOUR STUDENTS

From about 4 years of age, children internalize their culture's age stereotypes, which shape their feelings and behaviour towards people of different ages. Those stereotypes also inform the way they behave and think about themselves as members of a given age group.

The classroom is a good place to challenge prevailing cultural stereotypes of younger people and older people. A conversation about ageism with children and adolescents can help shift language and narratives about age, challenge ageist attitudes and behaviour and ultimately reduce ageism in the classroom and in the outside world.

Suggestions are given below for ways in which teachers could take up these conversations with their students.

## ***Prepare.***

Educate yourself in advance so you can challenge any common age stereotypes that emerge during the discussion, such as that adolescents are selfish or that older people are rigid.

### **Key resources:**

- Global report on ageism - [Full report](#)
- Global report on ageism - [Executive summary](#)
- Global report on ageism - [Infographic](#)

## ***Engage.***

Before starting a conversation about ageism, it is important to create an environment of mutual respect and empathy. This can be done by asking students to set ground rules for the discussion. Some suggestions include:

- Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
- Give everyone an opportunity to speak.
- Don't criticize individuals or groups (i.e. no name-calling).
- If you don't understand something, ask a question.

## ***Start with emotion.***

### **With children**

Ask your students to draw a younger person and an older person. Once they

have finished, ask them the following questions:

- How do these drawings make you feel?
- What differences do you see between these two drawings? What similarities?
- Who would you like to spend time with? Why?
- How would you describe older people? And younger people? Why?
- Do you think older people are all the same? How about younger people? Why or why not?
- Do you think your grandparent is the same as other older people you've met? Do you think your older brother or sister is the same as other children you've met? Why? Why not?

### **With adolescents:**

*Option A.* Ask your students to line up in alphabetical order by first name (from A to Z). Then, pick a letter at random and ask how they would feel if certain rules were applied to students according to their initials (see examples below).

- Those whose first name starts with the letter 'S' won't be given opportunities to contribute in class.
- Those whose first name starts with the letter 'A' will be ignored by classmates.

*Option B.* Write the following statements on the board.

- You're too young to understand.
- Young people shouldn't share their opinions.
- You shouldn't be doing that at your age!

If you chose option A, ask students how they would feel about application of these new rules. If you chose option B, ask your students how they felt when reading these statements. Make sure to ask for feedback from every student. Prepare some questions to get the conversation started, balancing the needs for both focus and openness in responses. Avoid questions that appear to have only one right answer. Possible questions include:

- What do you think about sorting people this way? Why? (*Option A*)
- How would these rules affect the class as a whole? (*Option A*)
- What makes people whose first name starts with the letter 'S' different from those whose first name starts with the letter 'B'? What makes them similar? (*Option A*)
- What do you think about these statements? Why? (*Option B*)
- How do these statements make you feel? Why? (*Option B*)

Following this discussion (either option A or B), make the connection between this activity and ageism. Explain that ageism is the expression of bias towards other people or ourselves on the basis of age. And that it can be as arbitrary as expressing bias towards other people or ourselves on the basis of the first letter of their name. You can now ask the following questions to enable your students to start engaging with the topic:

- What makes adolescents similar to adults?
- What behaviour or characteristics make us think of a person as “old” or “young?”
- When do people start to age?
- Do you have friends who are older than you? And younger than you? Why or why not?

### ***Continue with thoughts and reflections.***

Now encourage students to share what comes to mind when they hear the concept of ageism and when they think about ageing and their own age. This is an opportunity for you to clarify the concept, including what it is, who it affects, how people unknowingly contribute to it and how to confront it. Teachers will act as moderators to ensure that the conversation focuses on issues that lead to better understanding of ageism, including its expression in ourselves, in our relationships and in our institutions.

Some questions to start this conversation include:

- When do you think about your age?
- Do you look forward to getting older? Why? Why not?
- What does the word “ageism” mean to you? Have you heard it before?
- Where does ageism occur?
- How common is ageism?
- Why should you care about ageism? What impact does ageism have?
- How does society spread ageism?

### **Other suggestions:**

Find a children’s story, an article or an advertisement in a newspaper or magazine that describes people in an ageist way. Perhaps younger people are stereotyped as dangerous or older people as frail; perhaps the story encourages “staying forever young” or “anti-ageing” strategies, or perhaps a person is denied access or an opportunity because of their age (e.g. a younger person being ridiculed for running for political office or someone being denied life-saving treatment because they are over a given age). Ask students



to write down why each is an example of ageism and to share their thoughts with the rest of the class.

### ***End with actions.***

You can also discuss how students can challenge ageism when it occurs within and outside the classroom and what they can do to help reduce ageism in their community. Consider the following questions:

- If we were living in a world for all ages, what would we see in our school and in our community? What would we hear at school and in the community? What would we feel?
- What is one thing that each of you could do individually to challenge ageism at school? At home? In your community?
- Why should you care about ageism?
- We know that a good way to combat ageism is to have friends of all ages. What is one thing you, your family or your community could do to make it easier for older and younger people to exchange with each other?
- What can we do at school to challenge and reduce ageism?
- How can we remind ourselves to examine our thoughts, feelings and actions about age and ageing?

### **Key pointers:**

- Schools have an important role to play in helping to create a world for all ages. Evidence shows that educational activities to reduce ageist stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination and to enhance empathy help to reduce ageism. Intergenerational interventions that bring together younger and older people to work cooperatively also help reduce ageism, as they encourage cross-generational bonding and understanding.
- Children and adolescents can do a lot to challenge ageism. They can seek more interaction and friendships with people of different ages, including their grandparents. This should help them challenge their own thoughts, feelings and actions towards people of different ages and better appreciate similarities and differences among age groups. Children and adolescents can also help raise awareness and challenge ageism when they encounter it within their families, their schools and the broader community.

# A CONVERSATION WITH POLICY-MAKERS

Policies and laws are effective for reducing ageism against any age group. Examples include laws that enable workers to file age discrimination suits against their employers or filters that disqualify job or loan applicants on the basis of age, as well as human rights laws.

This guide is intended to help you initiate an informal conversation about ageism with policy-makers, as a step towards a more formal dialogue about this human rights issue.

## ***Know your context.***

Before meeting policy-makers, you should inform yourself about any steps your community or country has undertaken to address ageism, particularly at an institutional level. You may also wish to check if any particular issues related to ageism have recently been discussed in the media. Key areas to consider are:

- Existing or prospective national or international laws or policies that address age discrimination, age equality and protection of human rights
- Existing or prospective enforcement mechanisms and monitoring bodies for effective implementation of laws and policies addressing discrimination, human rights and inequality
- Recent media coverage on ageism (e.g. during the COVID-19 pandemic)

## ***Open the conversation.***

Begin by finding a way to generate interest in the topic. You may appeal to their understanding of ageism or introduce striking facts that they may not know. Some suggestions include:

- How much do you think that someone's age influences their opportunities or disadvantages in life?
- Have you heard the term "ageism" before? In what context?
- Who do you think is likely to experience ageism? Why?
- Did you know that [one of the key facts below]?

## **Key facts to get the conversation started:**

- One in two people in the world are ageist against older people.
- In Europe, younger people report more age discrimination than other age groups.

- In the USA, ageism led to excess costs of \$63 billion for a broad range of health conditions during one year. This amounts to one of every seven dollars spent on the eight most expensive health conditions for all Americans over the age of 60.
- Ageism is associated with earlier death, poorer physical and mental health and decreased well-being.
- The way we think about our own ageing will impact our health and well-being when we're older.

### ***Deepen the conversation.***

Deepening the conversation and making stronger links to the experiences or testimonies of ageism that policy-makers may have encountered in their lives – from childhood into adulthood – can help ground the conversation in something that is directly relevant to them. Consider asking the following questions:

- Can you think of a time when you were affected by ageism? What happened, and how did it affect you?
- Is ageism an issue that is currently being addressed in institutions?
- Do you think experiences of ageism are only the result of interpersonal interactions?
- Can systemic or institutional forces be at work?

### **Key facts to deepen the conversation:**

- Ageism involves stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination towards others or ourselves on the basis of age.
- Ageism can affect people of any age.
- Ageism can play out in subtle ways, and it exists in our institutions, our relationships and ourselves.
- People may fail to recognize the existence of institutional ageism because the rules, norms and practices of the institution are long-standing and have never been questioned.
- Institutional ageism can often be inferred from the disparate outcomes of individuals (e.g. access to jobs and training opportunities).
- Ageism is widespread in institutions and industries, including health and social care, entertainment and the media. For example, age is often used to restrict opportunities for employment and to determine eligibility for medical procedures or access to clinical trials.

## ***Close the conversation***

Closing a conversation about ageism with a policy-maker is as important as opening the conversation and laying the path for future action. However big or small, modest or grand, every action counts in raising awareness and reducing ageism. Consider asking the following questions:

- How would a world without ageism compare with the world today? What would be different in our institutions? What about our social and economic policies?
- What are some of the factors that prevent action to address ageism in institutions?
- What are some of the factors that help us address ageism in institutions?
- How can we connect with others and continue this conversation?

### **Key facts to close the conversation:**

- Policies and laws are effective for reducing or eliminating ageism against any age group. They can foster age equality, protect human rights and eliminate discrimination on the basis of age.
- Educational activities that transmit knowledge and skills and foster empathy are another effective means for reducing ageism, particularly against older people. This type of intervention is highly affordable and could be included at all levels of formal and informal education.
- Intergenerational interventions that bring together people of different generations are the third effective strategy for addressing ageism.
- Ageism is still poorly understood in some countries, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. This offers opportunities for research.

### **Key resources:**

- Global report on ageism - [Full report](#)
- Global report on ageism - [Executive summary](#)
- Global report on ageism - [Infographic](#)

## **Background resources**

1. This chair rocks. “Who me, ageist?” How to start a consciousness-raising group. HelpAge International; 2016 (<https://thischairrocks.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ConsciousnessRaisingBooklet.pdf>, accessed 2 February 2021).
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5. Conversation guide: Talking about race, racism , care and caregiving. Washington DC: Caring Across generations; 2020 (<https://caringacross.org/talking-about-race/>, accessed 2 February 2021).
6. We are Canada. Lesson package. Examining ageism . Ottawa: Government of Canada; 2016 ([https://cdn.we.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2016/10/Examining-Ageism-Diversity-and-Inclusion\\_MIDDLE-YEARS.pdf](https://cdn.we.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2016/10/Examining-Ageism-Diversity-and-Inclusion_MIDDLE-YEARS.pdf), accessed 2 February 2021).





GLOBAL CAMPAIGN TO COMBAT AGEISM