

# Adultification



## What is adultification?

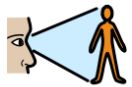
‘..When notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children.’ (Davis and Marsh, 2020)

Adultification is a type of bias which skews the perception of certain children, leading to others – including professionals – viewing them as more ‘grown up’ or, ‘adult’. This can then lead to lapses in appropriate safeguarding.

1. Black children are more likely to experience adultification bias
2. Racism is the core issue influencing the adultification of Black children
3. Black children are more likely to be met with suspicion, assumed deviance and culpability
4. Adultification reduces professional and organisational responsibility to safeguard and protect children, yet increases a responsabilisation of children to safeguard themselves
5. adultification bias is a breach of child safeguarding legislation and guidance (Webster, 2022)

Other factors include: (Full HM Inspectorate of Probation report [here](#))

**Experiencing domestic abuse. Socio-economic disadvantage. Experiencing transphobia. Homelessness.**



## What does it look like?

In 2020, Child Q, a Black female child of secondary school age, was strip searched by female police officers from the Metropolitan Police Service. The search, which involved the exposure of Child Q’s intimate body parts, took place on school premises, without an Appropriate Adult present and with the knowledge that Child Q was menstruating.

On the day of the search, teachers believed that Child Q smelt strongly of cannabis and they suspected that she might be carrying drugs.



On questioning Child Q, she denied using or having any drugs in her possession and a search of her bag, blazer, scarf and shoes revealed nothing of significance. Remaining concerned, teachers sought advice from the Safer Schools Police

Officer. Due to the restrictions arising from Covid-19, this officer was not on site. He recommended that the school call 101 and ask for a female officer to attend.



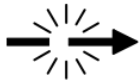
In March 2022, a Local Safeguarding Practice Review concluded that Child Q had been exposed to a traumatic event and had suffered harm. The report found that adultification was a factor in her treatment. It concluded that she ‘received a largely criminal justice and disciplinary response from the adults around her, rather than a child protection response’ and that ‘the disproportionate decision to strip search Child Q is unlikely to have been disconnected from her ethnicity and her background as a child growing up on an estate in Hackney.’



A male and female officer subsequently arrived at the school, followed by another two officers (one of whom was also female). After discussions between the police and teachers, Child Q was escorted to the medical room where she was strip searched. No Appropriate Adult was in attendance, teachers remained outside the room and Child Q’s mother was not contacted in advance. No drugs were found during either the strip search or a search of the room in which Child Q had been waiting beforehand. Child Q was later allowed to return home where she disclosed the events to her mother.



Click on me for podcasts that include information about adultification



## What is the impact of Adultification on children?

- **Psychological Effects:** Increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of being misunderstood or unsupported due to being held to adult-like standards.
- **Harsher Discipline:** More severe punishments in schools and legal systems, often disproportionately affecting children of marginalised groups.
- **Reduced Empathy:** Teachers, caregivers, and authority figures may show less compassion, assuming the child is more emotionally resilient than they are.
- **Barriers to Development:** Denial of age-appropriate experiences, such as play, support, or nurturing, which are crucial for healthy emotional and social growth.
- **Educational Inequities:** Higher rates of school suspensions or expulsions, leading to disrupted learning and limited academic opportunities.
- **Criminalisation:** Greater likelihood of being perceived as a threat, resulting in over-policing and entry into the juvenile or criminal justice systems.
- **Erosion of Self-Identity:** Struggle with self-perception and identity as children internalise societal biases about their maturity or worth.
- **Limited Access to Support:** Overlooked for mentorship, counselling, or protective services because they are mistakenly assumed to be self-sufficient.



## What can we do to challenge adultification?

Professional Curiosity is always key when safeguarding children. Do not assume - ask questions and seek to understand who the child is first. Professionals need to be actively anti-racist and be aware of the issues facing black children and other disadvantaged groups. They should be educated and informed, challenging their own bias. Professionals should seek to protect all children.

Professionals need to step away from thinking in stereotypes and to think more reflectively and critically about their own practice in supervision and collectively in multi-agency settings. Language used about children needs to be considered. Rather than “streetwise” “resilient” “angry” and “aggressive” we need to be saying “traumatised” and “needing protection”. Strengths based antiracist training is key.

There are steps you can take to help safeguard the children that you work with against adultification bias.

- Build Awareness
- Acknowledge Bias
- Foster a Culture of Professional Challenge
- Take a look at [Adultification bias of black children: Q&A with Jahnine Davis](#)

### Appropriate Language in Relation to Child Exploitation

#### Guidance for Professionals

This document seeks to provide guidance to professionals on the appropriate use of language when discussing children and their experience of exploitation in a range of contexts.

**Read this guidance [here](#).**