

Factsheet - Adultification

**Introduction – What is it?**

Adultification is defined as:

*‘..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.

When this happens outside the home, it is always grounded in bias and discrimination. Certain aspects of that child’s personal characteristics, socio-economic situation or lived experiences are met with discriminatory responses. This means that, rather than being seen as children experiencing abuse, they are viewed as either responsible in some way, or as more resilient and able to withstand maltreatment.

At its core, adultification bias is about adults treating children like they are more mature than they actually are. It can have damaging effects – and the “bias” part is about the fact that it’s particularly likely to happen to Black children.

## **Who is Most at Risk from Adultification Bias?**

Although adultification can apply to all children, there are clear groups of children that are more likely to be affected.

Black children are much more likely to be subject to adultification bias. Black boys and girls are often perceived through the lens of racialised stereotypes. The roots of these stereotypes can be linked back to the dehumanising racial attitudes of colonialism (Goff et al, 2014).

Whilst the roots may be historic, Davis (2022) points out that Black children are still seen as more ‘adult’, with Black boys often viewed as ‘angry or aggressive’ and Black girls ‘hyper sexual …, strong, loud and rude’. These attitudes mean that Black children experiencing, or at risk of, harm may not be seen as vulnerable or in need of safeguarding in the same way as their non-Black counterparts.

**Example**

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. 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.

**How to Tackle Adultification**

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

**Build Awareness**

Being aware of adultification, what it means and how it might manifest is an important first step. Share articles such as this and research further.

**Acknowledge Bias**

As people responsible for safeguarding children, it is essential that we examine what biases we may bring to work, as we can then take steps to acknowledge those biases and make sure that they do not influence our practice.

**Foster a Culture of Professional Challenge**

An effective culture of safeguarding is vital to enabling professionals to fully meet their safeguarding responsibilities. One bedrock of an effective safeguarding culture is the encouragement of professional challenge and curiosity. This enables staff to feel confident to have difficult conversations about subjects such as bias and adultification in a safe space. It is also vital in empowering members of staff to question when they feel a concern has not received an appropriate response.

**Watch Your Language**

When reflecting on how biases may impact your practice, it is useful to consider the language that is used when describing children at risk. Language choices can, often unintentionally, carry meaning which might compound adultification bias.

**See also** [**Listen Up Research video on Adultification**](https://listenupresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Adultification-Intro.mp4)

**See also** [**NSPCC information on Adultification**](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/children-from-black-asian-minoritised-ethnic-communities/)

[**www.rochdalesafeguarding.com**](http://www.rochdalesafeguarding.com)

Based on an article at <https://www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/what-is-adultification/> and the Child Q Review Report