

# Pan Bedfordshire Adultification Practitioner Briefing

## What is adultification?

As defined in statutory guidance, [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#), the term 'child' refers to anyone under the age of 18. 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/young person's personal characteristics, socio-economic situation or lived experiences are met with discriminatory responses. This means that, rather than being seen as children/young people experiencing abuse, they are viewed as either responsible in some way, or as more resilient and able to withstand maltreatment. National and local reviews have highlighted incidents where it appears some young people have been treated differently from their peers by professionals and the criminal justice system. **At its core, adultification bias is about adults treating children/young people 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/young people, there are clear groups that are more likely to be affected. Black children/young people 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/young people are still seen as more 'adult', with black boys often viewed as 'angry or aggressive' and black girls 'hypersexual ...', strong, loud and rude'. These attitudes mean that black children/young people 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.

**Intersectionality** plays a part in this concept. Intersectionality contributes to adultification by highlighting how multiple aspects of a child/young person's identity, like race, gender, and class, can overlap and create a unique experience of being perceived as older or more mature than their age, particularly impacting children from marginalized communities who may face harsher judgments or expectations due to these intersecting identities; for example, a Black girl might be seen as more mature or "knowing" than a white girl of the same age due to stereotypes about Black women's sexuality, leading to adultification bias. Black girls can be seen stereotypically as innately hypersexual, and this can impact on how they are identified as victims of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA).

**Impact on children/young people** can be devastating: They are left unprotected, vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, no longer turning to agencies for help due to lack of trust. They can receive harsher treatment in the criminal justice system, being held responsible for crimes as if they are adults, rather than exploited and abused children/young people. They have worse outcomes educationally and it affects self-esteem and mental health.

**Racism & Adultification.** The actions of practitioners have been evaluated in the context of the [Child Q's case](#) where her ethnicity and she was treated differently because she is Black. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review avoided using the term 'unconscious bias' as it suggests behaviour and organisational culture can't be changed. Child Q and her family felt this was a racist incident and the review stated that were Child Q not Black, her experience was unlikely to have been the same. Adultification bias was believed to be a significant factor in Child Q's experience.

## How to Tackle Adultification

There are steps you can take to help safeguard the children/young people 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 practitioners responsible for safeguarding children/young people, it is essential that they examine what biases they may bring to work, as they 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 practitioners to fully meet their safeguarding responsibilities. One bedrock of an effective safeguarding culture is the encouragement of all practitioners challenging and being curious. This enables practitioners to feel confident to have difficult conversations about subjects such as bias and adultification in a safe space. It is also vital in empowering practitioners to question when they feel a concern has not received an appropriate response.

### Watch Your Language

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

### Challenge

Equality, diversity and inclusion training must be integral to all practitioners safeguarding children/young people to challenge their bias and to reflect critically on these issues.

No child/young person should be "treated less favourably".

All practitioners to have a responsibility to challenge each other.

## Curiosity and Reflective practice

Professional curiosity is always key when safeguarding children/young people. Do not assume, ask questions and seek to understand who the child/young person is first and their lived experiences. Practitioners need to be actively anti-racist and be aware of the issues facing black children/young people and other disadvantaged groups. They should be educated and informed, challenging their own bias. Practitioners should seek to protect all children/young people. Practitioners 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/young people needs to be considered, rather than "streetwise" "resilient" "angry" and "aggressive" practitioners need to be saying "traumatised" and "needing protection". Strengths based anti-racist training is key.**

## Resources.

[Child Q Report](#) – Hackney Child Safeguarding Practice Review March 2022  
[Adultification bias of black children](#) Q&A with Jahnine Davis (3 min read).

Find out more in this [NSPCC learning resource](#).

[Becoming Culturally Competent - Effective Safeguarding of Children from Minority Ethnic, Cultural and Faith Communities, Groups and Families](#)

[Practitioner Briefing 'Heritage' = race, language, religion, and culture.](#)

[Practitioner Briefing - Cultural Competency](#)

Please access the [Pan Bedfordshire Interagency Child Protection Procedures](#).