

TALKING ABOUT ADULTIFICATION

What is adultification?

Adultification is where children and young people, in particular marginalised communities, are treated as if they are older than they actually are. This can lead to lapses in appropriate safeguarding.

What is the impact of adultification?

Unfortunately, this can lead to unrealistic expectations, reduced protection, and harsher treatment from adults, including caregivers, law enforcement, sports coaches and teachers.

Additional examples being:

- **Social & Emotional adultification** – When children & young people are expected to handle responsibilities, emotions or situations that are beyond their developmental stage.
- **Perceptual Adultification** – When children, particularly black and brown children, are seen as more mature and less in need of nurturing, leading to disparities in discipline, treatment in schools, and interactions with law enforcement.
- **Erosion of Self-Identity** – When children struggle with self-perception and identity as children internalise societal biases about maturity and self-worth.
- **Loss of innocence and childhood** – Adultified children are often expected to “toughen up” suppress emotions, or “act grown” which deprives them of normal developmental experiences.

Long Term Adult Outcomes

- **Relationship struggles** – Emotional suppression or forced maturity can make it hard to form healthy boundaries or express vulnerability in adulthood.
- **Career and educational gaps** – Interrupted schooling and mental health issues can affect college and career readiness.
- **Parenting difficulties** – Those who weren't nurtured may struggle to give or receive emotional support later as parents themselves.

Case study

In 2020, Child Q, a Black female child of secondary school age, was strip searched by a female police officer from the Metropolitan Police Service.

The search involved the exposure of the child's genitals, this took place on the school premises without an appropriate adult in attendance & the knowledge that Child Q was menstruating.

On the day of the search, it was believed that Child Q smelt strongly of cannabis, and they were suspected to be in possession of drugs.

Upon questioning Child Q, she denied using or carrying drugs in their possession, following a search of her bag, blazer, scarf and shoes it revealed nothing of significance.

Remaining concerned, the teachers sought advice from the Safer Schools Police Officer. Due to Covid 19 restrictions they were not onsite & recommended that the school call 101 and request a female police officer to attend.

A male & female officer arrived at the school, following a discussion between the police & teachers Child Q was escorted to the medical room where a strip search was conducted. No appropriate adult was in attendance, teachers remained outside, and Child Q's mother was not contacted or informed.

Following the conclusion of the strip search no drugs were found, Child Q was then allowed to leave and go home, and at this point disclosed the events to her mother.

In March 2022, a Local Safeguarding practice review concluded that Child Q had been exposed to a traumatic event & had suffered harm. The report concluded that adultification played a huge part in how Child Q was treated, it also stated that she “received a largely criminal justice & disciplinary response from adults around her, rather than a child protection response”.

Also, the decision to conduct a strip search was disproportionate and likely drawn from ethnicity and her background as a child raised on an estate in Hackney.

What can we do to challenge Adultification

- **Apply Professional Curiosity** – Don't assume, ask questions to seek and understand who the child is.
- **Acknowledge Bias** – Recognise your own biases, no matter how uncomfortable that may be.
- **Consider Language** – Reflect on how your biases may impact your practice, and how this may be reflected in the language used.

Ultimately, to challenge Adultification, we have to protect children's right to be children, to make mistakes, to be cared for, and to be seen through a lens of growth, not guilt.

More information on Adultification:

[Adultification bias in child protection & safeguarding - Russell Webster](#)

[Child Criminal Exploitation: The Power of Language](#)

[Adultification evidence review | College of Policing](#)

