Adultification

Introduction

Adultification happens when children are not seen first as children. Their behaviour, presentation or circumstances may be interpreted through adult expectations, which can reduce professional recognition of vulnerability, harm and need.

This briefing aims to raise awareness of how bias, context, and assumptions can influence professional judgement, and to support practitioners to recognise and respond to risk in a way that is child-centred, equitable, and trauma-informed.



Further Information

- Youth Justice Board Adultification Animation
- Listen Up Research - Adultification
- NSPCC Safeguarding children who come from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities
- College of Policing: Adultification and adultification bias

Why Intersectionality Matters

Adultification is often linked to racial bias, but it can also be shaped by gender, disability, culture, poverty, care experience, trauma, exploitation, behaviour, caring responsibilities and other circumstances.
These factors can overlap and increase the risk that a child's needs are misunderstood.

How Can Practitioners Avoid Adultification?

No child should be treated less favourably than another. Maintain professional curiosity and ask questions and seek to understand the child's lived experience. Be aware of and challenge bias, including through an anti-racist approach. Avoid assumptions, think critically about your practice, and use supervision and multi-agency working to reflect and improve responses to all children.

Who may be most at risk?

Adultification can affect any child, but evidence suggests it is more commonly experienced by Black children and children from other marginalised groups. Risk may be increased where disability, poverty, trauma, exploitation, care experience, or caring responsibilities are present. These factors can lead to children being viewed as more mature, resilient or responsible than they are, resulting in their vulnerability being overlooked.

What Does it Look Like in Practice

- Minimising risk because a child is perceived as "resilient" or "streetwise"
- Interpreting behaviour as a choice rather than a response to harm or trauma
- Failing to use appropriate language to record/convey concerns
- Expecting children to manage or protect themselves
- Responding more punitively rather than protectively
- Failing to recognise vulnerability or escalate concerns appropriately.

Impact on Children and Young People

The impact of adultification can be profound. Children may be left unprotected and more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation and may lose trust in services. They can face harsher responses within the criminal justice system, being treated as responsible rather than as victims. This can also negatively affect their education, self-esteem, and mental health.

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