

Child Q's Lived Experience

Child Q is a black female child of secondary school age from the London Borough of Hackney. She is described by her maternal aunt as having been a 'happy go lucky girl' with her mother sharing that she was someone who "liked to be active and get into things."

One day in 2020, Child Q went into school. On this particular day the teachers believed Child Q smelt strongly of cannabis and thought she may be carrying drugs. When asked by the teachers Child Q denied using or having any drugs in her possession. The teachers then followed their practice standards and searched through Child Q's bag, blazer, scarf and shoes. Nothing of significance was found.

Remaining concerned, the teachers contacted the Safer Schools Police Officer for advice and guidance on what to do next. Due to COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time, the officer was not onsite at the school. The officer recommended the school call the non-emergency police number 101 and ask for a female officer to attend. The teachers followed this advice and a male and female police officer arrived at the school, followed by a further two officers, one of whom was also female.

After discussions between the police and teachers, Child Q was taken to the medical room and subsequently strip searched by the female officers. Child Q was menstruating at the time of the strip search. The teachers remained outside the room and no Appropriate Adult was in attendance. 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 taking her exams at the time of the strip search. After the strip search had taken place, Child Q went back into an exam. Child Q's mother was not contacted either prior to or following the strip search. Child Q went home later that day and told her mother what had happened.

Child Q's Words

"Someone walked into the school, where I was supposed to feel safe, took me away from the people who were supposed to protect me and stripped me naked, while on my period...on the top of preparing for the most important exams of my life."

"I feel like I'm locked in a box, and no one can see or cares that I just want to go back to feeling safe again, my box is collapsing around me, and no-one wants to help. I don't know if I'm going to feel normal again. I don't know how long it will take to repair my box. But I do know this can't happen to anyone, ever again."

".....I'm just a child."

What we Learned from Child Q

Racism and Adultification: The review into Child Q found that racism, whether deliberate or not, was likely to be an influencing factor in the decision to strip search Child Q.

This can also be linked to the concept of 'adultification', which is when children and young people are perceived and treated as being more like adults and their vulnerability overlooked.

Research suggests that black children and young people are more likely to experience adultification. Child Q's voice is really powerful on this issue when they expressed they are "...just a child."

The below links will take you to three research resources that explore this topic:

[NSPCC Learning Briefing](#)

[Georgetown Law Study](#)

[Davis, J. and Marsh, N. \(2020\) Boys to Men](#)

Agency Authority: The school followed the expected practice standards in responding to concerns about Child Q smelling of cannabis and in the subsequent search of her coat, bag, scarf and shoes. This showed good curiosity by the teaching staff and an awareness of the potential indicators of risk.

When police officers arrived at the school, the teachers deferred to their authority. This meant there was a lack of challenge to the police about the actions they intended to take. We can all at times perceive another agency to have a greater authority in managing a particular situation but it is crucial that we all act as advocates for the children and young people we support or that are in our care.

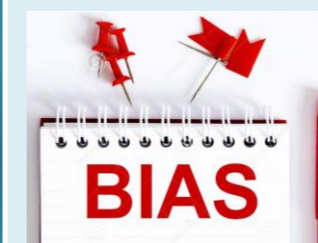
Focussing on Safeguarding: The strip search of Child Q should never have happened and there was no reasonable justification for it. There was a focus by agencies on whether Child Q had broken any rules or committed any offences in relation to drugs rather than maintaining a focus on their safeguarding needs.

In this regard, alleged drug use should prompt an approach that explores children and young people's safety and welfare and asks what may be going on behind the behaviour.

Thank you to the City & Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership for allowing us to use information from their Child Safeguarding Practice Review on Child Q to develop this Learning on a Page. To find the full report and learning on Child Q please [CLICK HERE](#)

Learning into Practice for Child Q

Start with Yourself: At the heart of adultification is our own personal biases. Take the time to think about and explore:



- Do you know and understand your own personal biases?
- How are these influencing the language you use and the decisions you make about children, young people and families?
- Are you jumping to a criminal response instead of a welfare or safeguarding response?

If you manage or supervise others then explore these questions with the people you support. Also, between colleagues, help each other reflect on why you are thinking of taking or have taken a particular course of action.

Take a look at **The Listen Up website** where you'll find lots of information on adultification and other related topics such as disproportionality and intersectionality.



Value Your Role and be an Ally: Sometimes it can be difficult to challenge another professional's decision making, especially when there is a power imbalance related to role or expertise. However, value your role and the part you have in a child or young person's life. Be their ally and step into a situation to help others think differently.

In Plymouth, we want to create a culture of healthy and respectful challenge where we all help keep children and young people safe together. You could:



- If faced with any situation say, "This doesn't feel right for the child or young person. Can we take a moment to stop and make sure we're doing the right thing, taking the right approach and following procedure?"
- Practice with colleagues or your supervisor ways of having these sorts of conversations that feels comfortable for you so when you need to have them you're better prepared.

.....and remember if you're the one receiving the healthy challenge don't take it personally or think your role means you can't be challenged, see it as in the best interests of the child. Take a moment to think with colleagues 'Is there a different way of approaching something.'

Policy Know How: To support you in being an ally for children and young people it's important to be aware of any relevant policies and procedures. For Child Q this related to searching and strip searching. So, get to know your organisations and national guidance on conducting searches. Following the review into Child Q the government is issuing new guidelines on strip searching children and young people. At the time of writing this Learning on a Page the new guidelines have not been published but will include updating the Police and Criminal Evidence codes of practice which you can find [HERE](#).