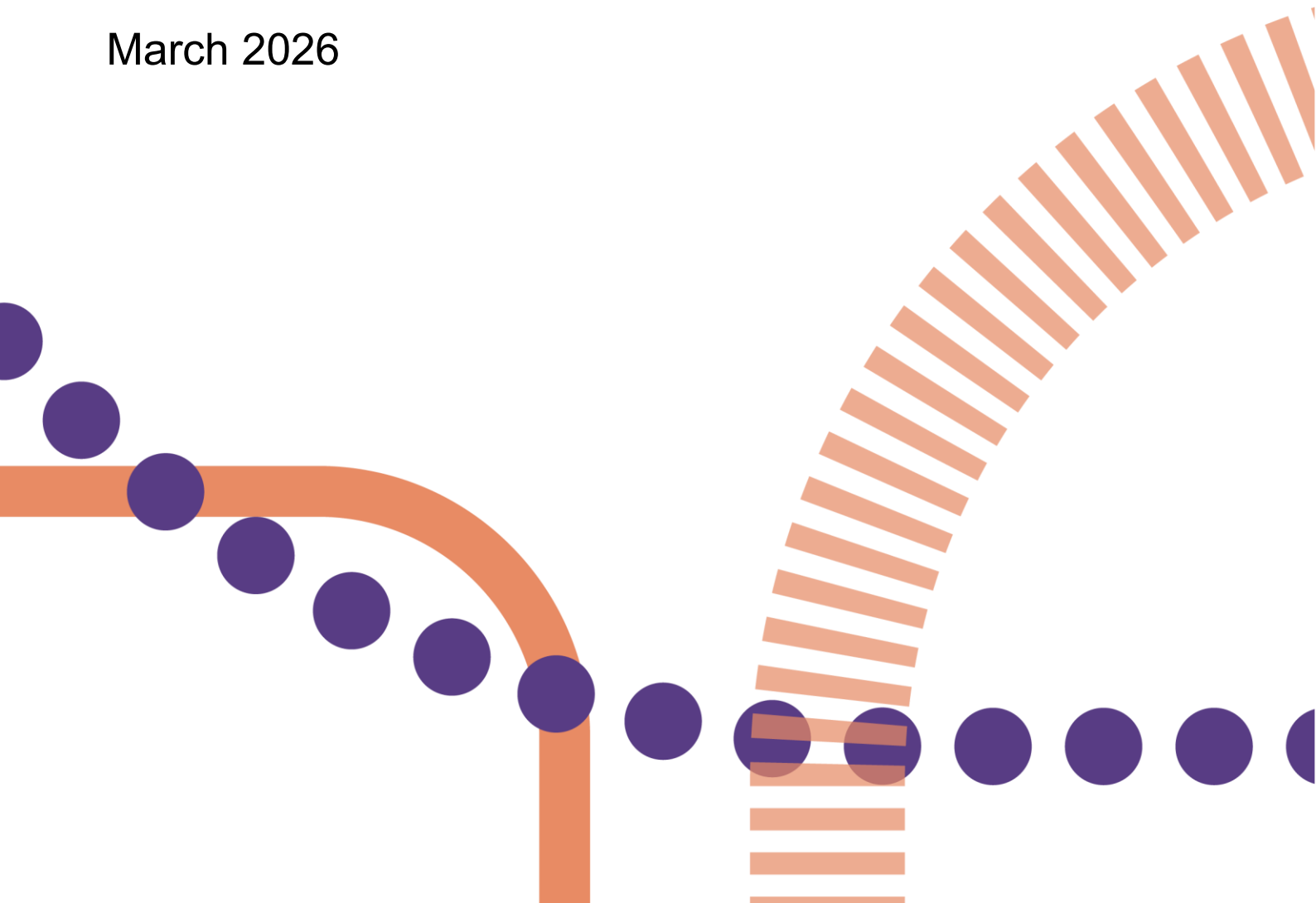


Race, racism and safeguarding children

Use of language and adultification in child
safeguarding reviews

March 2026



Introduction

The national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published a thematic analysis, 'It's Silent: Race, racism and safeguarding children' in March 2025. The report examines the impact of race, ethnicity and culture on multi-agency practice where children have suffered serious harm or died.

One of the key themes that emerged from the analysis was the “silence” in reviews about the role of racism – whether internalised/ interpersonal, institutional or structural in nature – in service and practice responses to Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage children and families.

Therefore, this briefing paper sets out information for multi-agency practitioners when considering the use and impact of language and the issues of adultification in local reviews where race and racism is a theme.

Who is this document for?

This brief is aimed primarily at professionals and leaders within safeguarding partnerships, including:

- People working or volunteering with children and young people, including practitioners in education, health, social care, and community settings.
- Safeguarding professionals and managers who need to understand changes to safeguarding and child protection policy and guidance.
- Organisations and agencies involved in safeguarding partnerships, to help them apply the report's findings and recommendations in practice.

How to use this resource

This resource is designed to help you reflect on the language you use in safeguarding practice and how it may shape the way children and families are understood. Use it alongside team discussions, supervision, or case reviews to consider where bias, stereotypes, or assumptions might be influencing decision-making. The examples and reflective questions will support you to notice when racism, racial bias, including adultification may be present, even when not explicitly named, and to think critically about how language can either obscure or illuminate the lived experiences of Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage children.

Why is it important for children and young people?

The words practitioners use directly, indirectly and whether verbally or in case notes affect how children are perceived, listened to, and protected. When racism, including adultification goes unrecognised, children can be misunderstood, blamed, or treated as older and more resilient than they are, making it harder for them to get the help they need. By being more aware and intentional about language, practitioners can ensure that children's vulnerabilities are not overlooked, that their identities are respected, and that

safeguarding responses truly reflect their experiences. This leads to better, fairer and safer outcomes for all children.

What is the evidence base?

Source of data: 54 safeguarding reviews (40 rapid reviews and 14 Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews).

Selection method: Stratified random sampling to ensure inclusion of cases involving Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage children and families.

Timeframe covered: Serious incidents occurring between January 2022 and March 2024.

Scope of sample: Reviews represented diverse socio-demographic characteristics and contextual factors, such as:

- Children missing education, employment, or training.
- Varied family structures and living arrangements.
- Mixed age ranges of children in focus through the cases from under one to 17 years old.
- Varying types of intra and familial harm to the children in question.

A thematic qualitative analysis was undertaken on the sample of reviews. The analytical framework was informed by academic literature and the guidance and expertise of the Panel sub-group. There was a dual focus on practice learning themes within reviews and reviewers' approaches to identifying learning.

Common issues

- Most of the reviews failed to explicitly name racism and, even when racial bias or discrimination was evident, it was often described in neutral language or ignored. This silence leads to missed opportunities for learning and systemic change.
- Language in some reviews also highlighted biases among professionals, including adultification e.g. where a child was seen as responsible for administering his own medication and appearing 'larger in stature'. This cohort of children can become "hyper-visible" when engaging in behaviour considered to be harmful or suspicious, but they then become "hyper-invisible" in terms of vulnerability.
- When race or culture is mentioned in reviews, it is often treated as incidental rather than integral to understanding risk and vulnerability. Language also frames families as "hard to engage" or "un-cooperative", placing blame on parents rather than examining systemic barriers. This means that the focus moves away from the children resulting in missed opportunities and a lack of understanding of the children's lived experience and vulnerabilities.
- Language in reviews sometimes reflects practitioners' fear of being perceived as racist. This can lead to avoidance of conversations about race, resulting in vague or euphemistic language. This demonstrates professional discomfort and defensiveness when addressing the issue of race, racism and adultification in reviews. Fear of becoming the primary focus may impede or act as a justification for practitioners over prioritising the safety and welfare of children.

- The term or application of intersectionality was rarely applied in reviews, which means the exploration of how race intersects with other factors such as gender, poverty, or neurodiversity was missing. Reviews often treat identity characteristics in isolation, missing the complexity of oppression and disadvantage.

Hallmarks of promising practice

- Where relevant, local reviews should explicitly name racism and bias and should avoid neutral phrasing where racism or discrimination is clearly evident. Reviews should clearly identify these issues rather than remaining silent or vague.
- Concepts and phrases such as “cultural competence” or “adultification” should not be used as a replacement for naming racism e.g. “this child experienced adultification due to racist assumptions and stereotypes about their behaviour or presentation”.
- Reviews should include the child’s own words and perspectives, especially regarding race and identity. This would ensure that the child’s lived experience helps to inform learning and drive recommendations for improvement.
- Language should acknowledge how race interacts with other factors including gender, poverty and neurodiversity.
- Reviews should avoid language which appear to blame families – i.e. “hard to engage” and “uncooperative”.
- Practitioners should be encouraged to feel empowered to discuss race and identity and they should be supported by senior leaders to examine personal biases.
- Language in reviews should avoid generic advice such as “improve cultural competence” and should instead outline concrete steps for challenging racist or biased practices.

Reflective questions and discussion points

These reflective questions and discussion points can be used by multi-agency practitioners and leaders when discussing the language in rapid reviews or local child safeguarding practice reviews (for example, with an independent reviewer).

The review found that terms such as racism and racial bias are not explicitly used nor explored in safeguarding reviews. Terms like “*cultural competence*” or “*adultification*” are often used without clear, practical meaning. These can become labels that obscure deeper issues of racism and bias rather than prompting meaningful action. Reviews rarely explain how such concepts should translate into practice thus leading to superficial or ambiguous terminology. Even when race or culture is mentioned, recommendations are generic (e.g., “improve cultural competence”) without specifying how to achieve this, or how partners define its meaning.

- Does the language sound neutral and professional, or does it carry judgmental undertones?

- Does the review take full account of the child and family's vulnerability as well as consideration of any experiences of discrimination?
- Does the review avoid stigmatizing terminology? For example, racial stereotyping.
- Does the review take full account of the child and family's vulnerability as well as consideration of any experiences of discrimination?
- Is the language clear and free from jargon, so families can understand it?
- Could any wording or framing influence decisions about the child or reinforce stereotypes or biases?
- Does the review describe the child's behaviours or actions in a way that assumes maturity rather than vulnerability?
- Does the review consider the child's cultural, social, and family context before interpreting behaviours as "adult-like"?

Questions for leaders

- Do we explicitly name racism, discrimination or racial bias in our reviews and assessments where it has influenced practice or decision-making?
- Are we confident that our practitioners understand what adultification is and can recognise when Black, Asian or Mixed Heritage children are being treated as older, less vulnerable, or more responsible than they are?
- Do we routinely examine the language used in our reviews to ensure it is not neutral, euphemistic, stereotyped or masking racism?
- Are practitioners supported and expected to talk openly about race, identity and racism with children and families, rather than avoiding these conversations?
- Do our reviews show evidence that children's own words and perspectives on race, identity and discrimination are recorded and used to inform learning?
- How consistently do we use an intersectional lens when analysing practice, considering how race interacts with gender, disability, poverty or neurodiversity?
- Do we challenge terms such as "hard to engage," "uncooperative," or other labels that can reflect bias or shift focus away from systemic barriers, and, or individual behaviours?

- Do practitioners feel supported to examine their own biases in supervision, and are leaders modelling this reflective practice?
- Are we confident that our reviews avoid attributing responsibility to children (adultification) and instead present them clearly as vulnerable and in need of protection?
- Do we ensure reviews include context about racism, cultural identity and discrimination, rather than treating these factors as incidental or irrelevant?

Case study

The example below from the thematic review illustrates how a child can be both “hyper-visible” and hyper-invisible at the same time.

A child from a Black Caribbean background had witnessed the murder of their friend and subsequently began wearing protective clothing; however, this was viewed by professionals as suspicious. The review further noted that the child themselves sustained injuries from a knife, however the child was viewed as a cause of harm as opposed to a victim. The child is hyper-visible in the sense that others perceive him as a potential risk, yet simultaneously hyper-invisible as a vulnerable child who fears harm being done to him.

Where can I find out more?

Find more information on the Panel’s new learning hub:

www.childsafeguarding.independent-panel.uk, where you can access videos, webinars, podcasts and other content, including the full report: [It’s Silent: Race, racism and safeguarding children](#).

Other resources include:

- Listen Up, [Pushing Forward: Testing learning on Adultification in Child Safeguarding Practices in England](#)

Annex A: Glossary

Term	Definition
Adultification	Adultification refers to the concept that “notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children. This is determined by people and institutions who hold power over them. When adultification occurs outside of the home it is always founded within discrimination and bias... the impact results in children’s rights being either diminished or not upheld” (Listen Up, 2020). This was later extended upon to explicitly reference its impact on Black children: “A persistent and ongoing act of dehumanisation, which explicitly impacts Black children, and influences how they are safeguarded and protected. This form of bias spans pre-birth and remains on a continuum to adulthood. Where at this juncture it becomes absorbed within the normative negative racialised experiences many Black adults encounter throughout their life course... race and racism remain the central tenant in which this bias operates” (Davis, 2022).
Culture	A social system of meaning and custom that is developed by a group of people to assure its adaptation and survival. These groups are distinguished by a set of unspoken rules that shape values, beliefs, habits, patterns of thinking, behaviours and styles of communication (Equity in Center, n.d.).
Ethnicity	Race and ethnicity are commonly used interchangeably. Although there is some overlap, they do not hold the same meaning. Ethnicity is broader than race and has usually been used to refer to long shared cultural experiences, religious practices, traditions, ancestry, language, dialect or national origins (for example, African-Caribbean, Indian, Irish). Ethnicity can be seen as a more positive identity than one forged from the shared negative experiences of racism. (Law Society, 2023).
Harmful practice	The National FGM Centre (2024) defines harmful practices as “persistent practices and behaviours that are grounded on discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, age and other grounds, as well as multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination that often involve violence and cause physical and/or psychological harm or suffering”. This definition informed our determination of whether the practices detailed within the sample of reviews could be considered harmful practice.
Intersectionality	Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to highlight the combined experiences of discrimination Black women experienced in the workplace, intersectionality is often discussed as a theory, methodology, paradigm, lens or framework. It recognises that people’s lives are shaped by their identities, relationships and social factors. These combine to create intersecting forms of privilege and oppression depending on a person’s context and existing power structures such as

	patriarchy, ableism, colonialism, imperialism, homophobia and racism (UN Women, 2022).
Oppression	When talking about ‘oppression’, we are describing the force that allows, through the power of norms and systems, the unjust treatment or control of different groups of people, including children.
Race	Race is recognised as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010. The Act defines ‘race’ as including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origins. Race is a categorisation that is based mainly on physical attributes and biogenetic traits of individuals, assigning people to a specific race simply by having similar appearances or skin colour (for example, Black or white). (Law Society, 2023). We recognise this term to be a social construct rooted in colonisation and empire building, closely linked to the justification of differential treatment of human beings (Bhavani, Mizra and Metoo, 2005; Equity in the Center, n.d.). In the context of this report, this relates to differential treatment of children and/or their families within and by the safeguarding system.
Racial Bias	Racial bias refers to the primarily unconscious thoughts, preconceptions, or experiences that cause people to think and act in prejudiced ways. The difference between racism and racial bias is that racism is based on a system of beliefs that always privileges one group of people above another, while racial bias refers to a constellation of associations and stereotypes that unconsciously impact our behaviour (see Morehouse & Banaji, 2024). Although, as a Panel, we acknowledge that racial bias can also be both unconscious and conscious.
Racial/racialised trauma	"Racial trauma is defined as the cumulative impact of race-based traumatic experiences at individual, institutional and systemic levels (Cénat, 2022).
Racial trauma	Defined as the cumulative impact of race-based traumatic experiences at individual, institutional and systemic levels (Cénat, 2022).
Racism	"Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism by an individual, community, or institution against a person or people on the basis of their membership of a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalised. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). Harper Browne and O’Connor present a socio-ecological model of racism, highlighting four forms of racism. These include: 1. Systemic/societal racism – historical and current macro-level ideology, values, laws, policies, and practices that create and sustain differential access to power, privilege, opportunity and resources, resulting in inequitable outcomes. 2. Institutional/community racism – discriminatory policies, procedures and practices in organisations and community

	<p>contexts that create and sustain differential access to power, privilege, opportunity and resources.</p> <p>3. Interpersonal/relational racism – verbal and non-verbal prejudiced and discriminatory interactions between individuals.</p> <p>4. Intrapersonal/individual racism – negative racialised ideas, feelings and attitudes."</p>
Silence	<p>We use the term 'silence' to refer to the absence, in reviews, of engagement with, or consideration of, practice learning relating to the ways in which race, racism, racial bias and other related concepts may have impacted on service and practice responses to Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage children and/or their families. We acknowledge that our insight into the entire process of conducting and publishing reviews is limited, given our analytical focus is only on the review report. This necessarily means we cannot know why the silences we observed in some reviews persist. However, we shine a light on these silences to promote dialogue around the ways in which practice – of both producing reviews and direct work with children and families – ignores, implicitly or intentionally, the significance of race, racism, and racial bias in the learning process and consequently the experiences of the children and families impacted by it.</p>
Voice of the child	<p>The term refers to “the real involvement of children in expressing their views, opinions, and experiences. It includes both verbal and nonverbal communication and goes beyond simply seeking their views to actively including them in decision-making processes” (NSPCC, 2024).</p>