



Safeguarding Black girls from child sexual abuse: messages from research

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Learning points

- Why the evidence base about child sexual abuse of black girls and women is limited, and what is known from the current research.
- The biases that may come in to play even when practitioners and services have good intentions to be inclusive, and how to work to address these.
- Tips to help you critically reflect on how language such as 'BAME' can influence thinking and practice.

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Introduction

We know that abuse of children of all ethnicities and backgrounds may remain hidden. Children can be silenced into not telling and adults may not recognise disclosures, leaving children at ongoing risk and not supported. (See Community Care Inform's [key practice points about child sexual abuse](#) and [guide to understanding the process of disclosure](#)). However, children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups (and other groups, in particular disabled children) are less likely to come to the attention of authorities, face additional barriers to accessing statutory services and receive a poorer quality of support (Children's Commissioner, 2015).

In addressing these challenges, we need to be conscious of what thinking about 'BAME' groups can mean in practice. This acronym encompasses all non-white populations. While children from these populations may have some commonalities in their experience of wider structural oppression, the use of a singular 'BAME' category can lead to the experiences of different groups being conflated and a homogenised understanding in research and practice of the experiences of people who fall within it (Aspinall, 2002; Bernard, 2016; Wilson, 2016).

Consequently, there is still a significant gap in our understanding of how children from specific communities in this country disclose CSA, both within cultural community networks and to external support provision.

This guide focuses on the author's main area of research: Black girls and women's experience of sexual abuse. But the thinking – why are these children missing, what biases might we hold, what further research is needed, are we conflating different groups, how can I improve practice in my local area to meet the needs of populations we serve – should be applied to working with all groups and it is hoped that further research will be undertaken to fill some of these gaps.

What does current research say?

As highlighted, there is a distinct lack of research about Black girls and women's experience of CSA. At the time of writing, there is only one piece (Wilson, 2016) of scholarly primary research that explicitly addresses CSA in Black African/African-Caribbean communities in the UK, which involved speaking to female adult victim-survivors.

However, there are some messages we can take from existing research about how Black girls are viewed in their own communities, by society generally and by children's and sexual abuse services that can help develop more reflective practice.

'Adultification'

A key finding is that Black girls can be viewed as less vulnerable than their white peers. Epstein (2017) found that from the age of five, African American girls were viewed as more adult-like throughout all stages of childhood in comparison to their white peers. This increased during the ages 10-14 where they were perceived as more mature and sexually aware, and less innocent. Jones and Trotter's 2009 study of CSA in the Eastern Caribbean made similar findings and the phenomenon has been conceptualised as 'adultification' (Goff et al., 2014; Ocen 2015). These studies found that the collective understanding of the normative child – innocent, vulnerable and in need of protection – is white.

If Black girls are not seen as girls but as hypersexual beings, then it just becomes an unconscious blind spot when trying to identify child sexual abuse

Rita*

'Adultification' may therefore reduce or alter professionals' sense of their safeguarding responsibilities to Black girls. We might see this in referral patterns for example are Black girls mainly being referred to gang-related services and discussed in terms of "problematic behaviours" – are they seen only through one lens and not as potential victims of sexual abuse? (Davis, 2019)

This concept of adultification goes beyond CSA, and goes beyond girls, and can be seen in the justice system where Black children are perceived and treated as adults and therefore more likely to receive punitive responses, harsher sentencing and decreased protection.

*Rita and other women quoted in this guide took part in a small qualitative study (eight participants) as part of the author's research. All had experience of CSA as practitioners or researchers. During the study, over half of the participants disclosed being victim-survivors of CSA. All names have been changed.

The 'jezebel'

In a small qualitative study I undertook (see box), all the participants spoke of how Black women and girls experience racism and sexism in an interrelated way (sometimes referred to as 'intersectionality'). Many referred to the idea of the 'jezebel' (Collins, 1990), of Black female sexuality being hypersexual and available to all.

This ongoing research also indicates beliefs about legitimised access to Black girls and their bodies within music scenes, and assumptions of Black female sexuality drawn from pornography or twerking entering popular culture, which can all lead to the sexualisation of young women being normalised.

There is a correlation here with historical precedents for sexualising Black women's bodily features such as Ssehura, a Khoisan woman (also known as Sara Baartman – the 'Hottentot Venus').

I was called 'blow jobs lips' by both White and Black boys. I knew it was a bad term, but I didn't feel ok to ask anyone, so I internalised it – it was White boys who started it but Black boys who continued it. (Makeda)

The intrusiveness when they [Black girls] hit adolescence, everyone talking about their shape and how they look. I think a lot of us accept it as we think it is a part of our culture. (Amara)

'Strength'

Assumptions of Black young women and girls having innate strength and resilience – "the strong Black woman" (Collins, 1990; Kanyeredzi, 2014; Wilson, 2016) can also influence perceptions of coping mechanisms, impacting on how much support is provided in comparison to other children and young people.

When you are in crisis or in distress, in need, no one is looking at you, they are not interpreting my feelings as distress.

(Amara)

We are not allowed to cry – magical, masculine traits – we have to hold it, if you're punched in your face, hold it.

(Makeda)

These assumptions may silence Black women and girls from speaking out, whilst further increasing their vulnerability to experiencing sexual abuse. Wilson (2016) talks about 'limited spaces to speak' about child sexual abuse and other related issues for Black girls due to both increased barriers accessing traditional safeguarding services and an unlikelihood of sharing experiences with family or the wider community. The lack of agency and capacity to speak about experiences of child sexual abuse can apply to children and young people regardless of race and ethnicity, however limited agency to speak both in their own communities and externally can mean that Black girls will remain under the radar as victim status is not afforded to them.

My research has also indicated an 'over-valuing' of Black boyhood by communities compared with girlhood. For example, the belief that boys need protecting from their increased risk of punitive responses from law enforcement, and a desire not to reinforce any harmful perceptions. Again this can reduce the protection and support available for girls.

'Unconscious bias'

Discussing and addressing forms of bias mentioned above within service provision can be uncomfortable. But we need to acknowledge that they are there and can be further barriers to victims of CSA (and other forms of abuse) building relationships and accessing genuine support.

A lot of women and girls talk about turning up in spaces and not feeling welcomed: really subtle behaviours impacting on how they view interpersonal relationships with practitioners. (Amara)

We're seen as 'angry Black women'; 'aggressive and confrontational'

Racism may sometimes be overt but participants in my research also spoke a lot about the complexities and nuances when practitioners have good intentions to be inclusive but they way that services present themselves can still act to silence Black girls.

These include not considering use of language, who is represented in posters and information leaflets, how the space feels and the bias a Black girl or woman might have experienced over a lifetime.

There is danger that having good intentions means services and individuals do not sufficiently examine how young Black women are actually receiving (or not receiving) their service, allowing harmful practice where Black girls feel excluded or unheard to continue.

The concept of 'unconscious bias' has become increasingly popular and some organisations offer training to tackle it. However, we need to retain a critical reflective approach to what biases are shaping personal and service-wide behaviour and try to make the unconscious conscious in order to address it.

It is also imperative that we look honestly at whether equality, diversity and inclusion are regarded as an integral part of safeguarding practice, or if they are seen as an 'add on'.

Conclusion

This cannot be a comprehensive guide to protecting Black girls from child sexual abuse, let alone those from other ethnic backgrounds. Other inequalities around class, sexuality or being in care impact on any young person and we need to consider how these might interact with race and gender in terms of abuse being noticed or disclosed. Black boys and men's experiences of child sexual abuse is also 'missing' from practice and research, likewise children from other minoritised communities and ethnicities. Filling in the gaps in research and policy will help, but there is still much that individual practitioners and services can do to develop better support and protection from CSA for all young people. Some suggestions are given below:

Suggestions for practitioners

- 1 Refrain from using the abbreviation (or worse, acronym) BAME; be interested in understanding how the person in front of you defines their culture, identity and representation.
- 2 Remember BAME categorisation is also used for data collection purposes, which do not always translate into people's real-life experiences.
- 3 Case file analysis: use reflective practice and supervision to question and identify gaps in knowledge and how it impacts on decision making.
- 4 Find a 'critical friend' who can challenge and support reflection on how you respond to people who are different from you.

- 5 Read texts which explore experiences of racism and bias. For example, in [White Fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism](#), Robin Di Angelo discusses some of the challenges to confronting racism.

Considerations for services and leaders

- 1 Provide high quality training based on organisational need – generic diversity and inclusion training may not be appropriate. Training should address if teams and services are representative or reflective of children, young people and families accessing support in your area.
- 2 Champion uncomfortable conversations on race, racism and bias.
- 3 Establish 'critical friends' to review support provision.
- 4 Review your services – where are Black girls (and Black boys, and children from other minoritised communities) being referred to? Is there a disproportionality of different groups' being referred to specific services?
- 5 Do your services provide a localised response to ensure Black children are receiving an effective service?
- 6 Are policy leads, senior management and trustees diverse and representative of the communities you serve? Do they need training and support to ensure they are not complicit in further marginalising lesser heard voices?



What to read next

[The impact of child sexual abuse: messages from research](#)
[Sexual abuse of boys: messages from research to support recognition and disclosure](#)
[Children's disclosures of sexual abuse](#)
[Supporting children to speak about sexual abuse](#)
[Child sexual abuse knowledge and practice hub](#)

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