

# The Presentation of Parentification and Adultification Biases in Child Abuse Cases

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## Introduction

When an allegation of child sexual abuse or maltreatment is reported to law enforcement or child protective services, the allegation is initially assessed and either assigned a child welfare response or screened out. In cases where the allegation could constitute a criminal act, a multidisciplinary response to the investigation of the initial allegation is best practice. Legal frameworks often concretely define many aspects of the required child welfare response protocol. However, the credibility of the child's initial disclosure and information gathered through subsequent processes (such as an investigative interview or safety assessment) are also considered when determining how child welfare professionals should respond or intervene. The discretion of responding professionals and their perceptions of the child's credibility can shape case trajectories and, by extension, children's access to services, support, and resources when in need. Thus, it is critical for child abuse multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) to examine biases that may affect their view of a child's credibility. Adultification and parentification bias are two such areas of consideration.

## What is Parentification?

Parentification occurs when children provide “caregiving for family members that typically exceeds their capacity and developmental stage.”<sup>1</sup> This can include a process of role reversal whereby a child or adolescent is obliged to act as caregiver for the child's own parent, other family members, or siblings. Parentification is generally categorized in two ways: instrumental parentification and emotional parentification. Instrumental parentification refers to the completion of physical tasks by a child that would normally be completed by a parent, such as looking after a sick relative, paying bills, or aiding younger siblings. Emotional parentification refers to situations where a child or adolescent takes on the role of an emotional support system, confidante, or mediator for (or between) parents or family members. When considering whether an observed family dynamic is parentification, professionals should remember that there can be differing norms around what specific tasks and roles are generally ascribed to parents and which are generally ascribed to children within different

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<sup>1</sup> Justyna Borchet et al., We are in This Together: Retrospective Parentification, Sibling Relationships, and Self-Esteem, 29 J. CHILD & FAM. STUD. 2982 (2020).

families. This can be informed by differing abilities and cultural contexts. There may be varying views on what is broadly considered appropriate and what is not depending on the dynamics of the family.

Parentification is not inherently pathological, nor is it in itself inherently abuse or maltreatment. Parentified children will not always experience detrimental outcomes because of being cast in a parentified role. Research indicates that in some cases, experiences of parentification such as caring for a sibling or grandparent may contribute to feelings of self-efficacy, competence, and other positive outcomes. Differences across culture can also shape a child's relationship to parentification and its impacts.<sup>2</sup> Parentified children are often seen as mature, obedient, and respectful because of their ability to act as adults do. While these traits are often celebrated and encouraged, the failure to associate these characteristics as potentially co-occurring with a history of abuse can mask true abuse or limit the detection of abuse. For instance, if a sibling group is experiencing parental neglect, but the oldest child learns how to do the household chores, prepares meals, and bathes the other children, the impacts of the neglect may go undetected.

Outside of particular contexts, parentification roles and responsibilities can be linked with harmful outcomes, including robbing children of age-appropriate opportunities, activities, and support.<sup>3</sup> This destructive parentification can be linked to maladaptive parenting, child maladaptation, physical abuse, sexual abuse, behavioral problems, decreased emotionality, poor social competence, higher risk of depression, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, anxiety, low self-esteem, and loss of childhood.<sup>4</sup> Because of the behavioral and psychological manifestations, warning signs or indicators of destructive parentification are more likely to be detected and raise concern about a possibility of abuse, maltreatment, or other discord in the child's life.

## What is Adultification?

Adultification embodies two distinct but related concepts. The first is a process of socialization in which some children function at a more mature developmental stage because of "situational context and necessity, especially in low resource community environments."<sup>5</sup> Adultification also refers to how society perceives different children in the "absence of knowledge of children's behavior and verbalizations," often informed by social or cultural stereotypes.<sup>6</sup> For example, a 2017 Georgetown Law qualitative study found that adults view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers, even in the 5-to-9-year-old age bracket.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, compared to white girls of the same age, survey participants perceived that Black girls needed less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort than white girls. Black girls were also perceived as being more independent and knowing more about adult topics, including sex.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Eva Tedgård et al., An Upbringing with Substance-Abusing Parents: Experiences of Parentification and Dysfunctional Communication, 36 NORDIC STUD. ON ALCOHOL & DRUGS 223 (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake & Thalia González, Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood, GEO. L. CTR. ON POVERTY & INEQ., 2017, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3000695>.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

In another study, researchers found that 10-year-old Black boys were perceived by police officers and undergraduate white women as 4.5 years older than white 10-year-old boys.<sup>9</sup> The application of adultification bias is intersectional, shaped by race, gender, and class. A large body of research supports the proposition that racial stereotypes in particular affect how adultified minors are perceived and thus how they are responded to systemically. This hypothesis was aptly stated in the conclusion of the Georgetown study:

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*...Adultification may play a role in the child welfare system, which is based on the foundational principle of serving to nurture and protect youth. Authorities in this system who view Black girls as more independent and less needing of nurture and protection may assign them different placement or treatment plans from white girls.<sup>10</sup>*

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## How Parentification and Adultification Present in Cases

For children that experience parentification, true abuse experiences may be minimized or left undetected because the children appear to be more “adult-like,” mature, or obedient. They may be treated as older than they are or have their true developmental level ignored because they appear to have “adult-like” language and behavior. Maladaptive behaviors that are the result of parentification may be misunderstood as solely a youth’s individual display of maturity or resilience rather than as potentially concurrent with or a response to a history of true abuse.

MDTs may overemphasize youth behaviors that are perceived as “problematic” in situations where real or perceived adultification or parentification manifest in ways that are not associated with obedience or maturity. Examples include participation in age-appropriate, consensual sexual behavior, delinquency, drug and alcohol use, disruptive behaviors, or distrust or disdain for authority. In these cases, there may be a propensity on the part of teams to focus on everything that the youth did “wrong,” and how the child’s actions and behaviors call into question the reliability of any abuse disclosures. MDTs will sometimes fixate on how the child’s behaviors affect credibility, without acknowledging how exactly the concerning behaviors could also be consistent with a history of abuse.

If a child appears “adult-like”, physically or behaviorally, there can also be an unwillingness to modify the interview process to meet the child’s needs. There can be an assumption that the child should be interviewed like an adult. This could deprive the child of the benefit of a forensic interview by a trained professional and instead result in adversarial questioning that is not conducive to obtaining accurate abuse disclosures.

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<sup>9</sup> Philip A. Goff et al., The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children, 106 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. 526 (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake & Thalia González, Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood, GEO. L. CTR. ON POVERTY & INEQ., 2017, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3000695>.

## Counterintuitive Victim Behaviors, Child Abuse Accommodation Strategies, and Perceptions of Credibility

The implications of parentification and adultification bias in child abuse case outcomes can be further understood when examining literature on the perceived credibility of alleged child abuse victims. A 2009 study published in the *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* found that the likelihood a child's allegation of sexual abuse will be believed is inversely related to the perception of the child's age and maturity.<sup>11</sup> While the "research points to broad concerns around the accuracy and competency of younger children, their generally accepted naivete and lack of sexual knowledge minimizes suspicions that they are lying about reports of sexual events and are ultimately seen as more trustworthy."<sup>12</sup> Further, in a 2001 study, researchers found that in cases of child sexual abuse, perceptions of trustworthiness may be the primary factor influencing perceptions of credibility and that younger children are generally found to be more credible or trustworthy because they are considered to be sexually naive and less able to lie about sexual events.<sup>13</sup> A third study found that a 6-year-old child was judged more credible as a witness to sexual assault than both a 14-year-old child and a 22-year-old adult.<sup>14</sup>

Many studies further expand on perceptions of culpability. Outcomes in several studies suggest that when a child approaches adulthood, there is a perception that they incur some level of "responsibility" for their own experience of sexual abuse or assault.<sup>15</sup> In situations where the abuse was seen as "non-detrimental" or it was perceived that the victim received some sort of "benefit" or "positive experience" as a result of the abuse, there was a more prominently stated perception that the youth was in some way culpable.<sup>16</sup> This is frequently seen in cases where an attractive female teacher sexually abuses a teenage male student. It can be particularly problematic for victims in cases where the alleged offender used inducements or enticements to engage the child in the abusive dynamic or to maintain the secrecy, such as giving the child a material gift that may be perceived as a "benefit" or "positive."

Thus, it follows that children who are generally perceived as older than their chronological age, whether because of parentification, adultification, or other circumstances, are less likely to be believed or seen as credible. These same "adult" behaviors (e.g., unusual or age inappropriate sexual knowledge or substance abuse) that are associated with a lack of credibility can, in some cases, also be symptomatic of or happen concurrently with (although they are not diagnostic of) a history of

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<sup>11</sup> M. Davies & P. Rogers, Perceptions of Blame and Credibility Toward Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Differences Across Victim Age, Victim-Perpetrator Relationship, and Respondent Gender in a Depicted Case, 18 *J. CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE* 78 (2009).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> M. R. McCauley & J. F. Parker, When Will a Child Be Believed? The Impact of the Victim's Age and Juror's Gender on Children's Credibility and Verdict in a Sexual-Abuse Case, 25 *CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT* 523 (2001).

<sup>14</sup> B. L. Bottoms & G. S. Goodman, Perceptions of Children's Credibility in Sexual Assault Cases, 24 *J. APPLIED SOC. PSYCH.* 702 (1994).

<sup>15</sup> S. Back & H. M. Lips, Child Sexual Abuse: Victim Age, Victim Gender, and Observer Gender as Factors Contributing to Attributions of Responsibility, 22 *CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT* 1239 (1998); B. L. Bottoms & G. S. Goodman, Perceptions of Children's Credibility in Sexual Assault Cases, 24 *J. APPLIED SOC. PSYCH.* 702 (1994); M. Davies & P. Rogers, Perceptions of Blame and Credibility Toward Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Differences Across Victim Age, Victim-Perpetrator Relationship, and Respondent Gender in a Depicted Case, 18 *J. CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE* 78 (2009).

<sup>16</sup> S. D. Broussard & W. G. Wagner, Child Sexual Abuse: Who Is to Blame?, 12 *CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT* 563 (1988).

sexual abuse.<sup>17</sup> If professionals fail to recognize these behaviors as possible coping mechanisms, sometimes referred to as “accommodation strategies,” this can further exacerbate the degree of adultification to which youth are subjected.<sup>18</sup>

## The Complicating Factor of Racial Disparity

There is a historical overrepresentation of children of color within the child welfare system, particularly in cases where the alleged abuse is the result of poverty-related factors.<sup>19</sup> Racial bias plays a role in causing unnecessary, unfounded, and invasive child protection interventions, but can also obscure the detection of true abuse when factors like adultification bias are involved. The recognition and dismantling of biases are critical in reducing and eliminating systems inflicted harms and ensuring children who need protection receive it.

In a blog post featured on the University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare website, Kelis Houston, a subject-matter expert on the overrepresentation and inequitable treatment of African-American children and families across the child welfare service continuum, stated, “The perpetual clogging of our child protection system with children that are not at risk of harm has exhausted...resources...while leaving children truly in need of protection, vulnerable and at risk.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Roland C. Summit, The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome, 7 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 177 (1983).

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> M. M. Thomas, J. Waldfogel & O. F. Williams, Inequities in Child Protective Services Contact Between Black and White Children, 28 CHILD MALTREATMENT 42 (2022).

<sup>20</sup> Kelis Houston, The Color of Child Welfare, CTR. FOR ADVANCED STUD. IN CHILD WELFARE, 2022, <https://cascw.umn.edu/policy/the-color-of-child-welfare/>.

## Case Study

*Details were changed to respect privacy.*

### Sammy's Case

Sammy, a 14-year-old girl from a rural area, lived in a highly controlled environment, spending time exclusively with her dad and uncle. Sammy was not allowed to participate in sports or activities after school, have friends over at her house, or stay at someone's house without her uncle or dad present. As a young person in need of socializing, Sammy started skipping class to spend time with friends. One day, when Sammy skipped school, she and a group of girls started playing with fireworks, which caused dry grass and brush to catch fire. The fire spread out of control and caused significant property damage to an abandoned building.

The group was caught and held responsible for the arson, which resulted in Sammy being sent to a juvenile detention center. During her time there, Sammy disclosed that her dad and uncle had sexually abused her and that she was also the victim of commercial exploitation, referring to instances when her father would allow others to sexually violate Sammy in exchange for material goods, such as snow tires on his truck. Sammy said this started when she was four years old, which she verified by describing the location where she and her dad lived at the time.

After Sammy's disclosures, the MDT and other professionals were skeptical about the circumstances. Some team members questioned why an articulate 14-year-old girl, who spent 8 hours daily at school with adults and understood the wrongfulness of the conduct, would wait years to disclose. It was suspected that Sammy might be making a disclosure to deflect from her wrongdoing and to blame others for her behavior. One team member was concerned about whether a sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation case could move forward due to the public perception of her delinquency in her small town, even if her allegations were corroborated.

During the forensic interview, Sammy was asked (in an age-appropriate way) about her disclosure process and barriers she encountered.<sup>21</sup> When asked what stopped her from telling anyone before now, Sammy said that she never saw an opportunity to talk about it before and that it took time for her to understand what was happening, as when she was younger, she did not really understand. Sammy also said that she always thought that she was the only one that this had happened to, and when she started learning about other people having experiences like hers, it encouraged her to tell. When she was asked about what made it okay to talk about it now, Sammy said that knowing she was going to be away from her dad and uncle for a while made it feel more okay to tell. She spoke about the intentional ways her dad and uncle isolated her and threatened her to deter her from disclosing. She also said that through her intake process at the juvenile detention center, she was asked very specific questions about past experiences of abuse. She said being directly asked about these

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<sup>21</sup> See "Suggestions for Practice" below for sample language.

experiences by someone she felt comfortable with also made it feel okay to disclose. While it is not a forensic interviewer's job to evaluate the truthfulness or reliability of a child's statement in a forensic interview, interviewers should strive to gather as much detail as possible, which includes exploring what impacted the disclosure process for a young person.

## Suggestions for Practice

**Look holistically at the child's life and recognize how parentification and adultification biases can impact perceptions of children and cases.**

Normalize looking at the constellation of factors in a child's life before drawing conclusions about the credibility and reliability of a child's disclosure. This includes, but is not limited to, an examination of:

- The verbal disclosure
- Witnessed accounts or found materials (child sexual abuse materials, notes, journals, text messages, blog posts, etc.)
- Corroborative evidence
- Collateral statements
- History of abuse or history with the system
- Documented physical or behavioral changes to the child
- Reported behavioral or physical changes to the child
- Polyvictimization
- Identity, particularly how historical marginalizations have impacted how a child or family may relate to the system or affects access to resources and services
- Other life experiences

**Professionals should *expect* that many disclosures will occur concurrently with other “problematic” behaviors. While the presence of maladaptive behaviors is not diagnostic, a child often discloses when their accommodation strategies and coping mechanisms no longer serve them, become out of control, create other concerns for them, or contribute to disturbances in their ability to function physically, emotionally, psychologically, or socially. Strike a balance between respecting both the developmental age and lived experience of the young person.**

Child abuse professionals must recognize that there can be incongruence between how a child presents and what their actual developmental level requires from the interview process. Interviewers should use language appropriate for the child's developmental level and continue to follow the protocol. The interview should not be treated as a conversation with an adult because the youth displays “adult-like” behavior. Child advocacy centers should also consider whether the waiting areas, activities, support groups, aftercare, and materials they use are appropriate for teens and adolescents.



### *Expanded Interview Process<sup>22</sup>*

MDTs should support the training of forensic interviewers in expanded or multi-session forensic interviewing processes. These interview strategies can prove effective when parentification or adultification contribute to a child's reluctance in the interview process, when there are multiple victimizations, or where other complex case dynamics exist.

### *Language Matters*

Examine how behaviors associated with parentification or adultification bias are described. To whom are positive or negative qualifiers assigned? Is the youth "defiant" or are they expressing concerns or reluctance because they don't know what is going to happen to them? Does a youth have a "bad attitude" or are they tired and irritable because they don't have a place to sleep or access to necessary resources? Is a child "mature for their age" or have they had to operate as an adult to address gaps in caregiving?

### *Explore the Process of Disclosure in the Forensic Interview*

Forensic interviewers should ask age and developmentally appropriate questions about to whom the child disclosed and what impacted their ability or inability to disclose. Sample questions may include:

- What made it okay to talk about \_\_\_\_ (child's words) now?
- Tell me about not being able to talk about \_\_\_\_ (child's words) when you were younger.
- Did something stop you from talking about \_\_\_\_ (child's words) before? If yes, tell me about that.
- Has someone asked you or told you to keep a secret about something? If yes, tell me about that.
- Has someone asked you or told you not to talk about \_\_\_\_ (child's words)? If yes, tell me about that.
- Is there something you're not supposed to talk about today? If yes, tell me about that.
- Who did you tell about \_\_\_\_ (child's words)?
- (Ask what they told each person. With a younger child, you may ask) What words did you use when you told \_\_\_\_\_ (person child identified they told)?
- How are you feeling talking about this today?
- What worries or concerns do you have about talking about \_\_\_\_ (child's words)?

### *Expert Witnesses*

Expert witnesses can assist with providing context around abuse disclosure patterns and the dynamics of abuse, as well as counterintuitive and misunderstood victim behaviors.

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<sup>22</sup> An expanded, or multi-session interview is one forensic interview broken up into multiple sessions to allow for more time to build rapport or explore the youth's experiences of abuse or maltreatment. R. Farrell, Not Another Bite at the Apple: Individualizing the FI Process, ZERO ABUSE PROJECT, 2022, <https://zeroabuseproject.org/not-another-bite-at-the-apple-individualizing-the-forensic-interview-process-to-meet-the-child-s-needs/>



### *Recognize the impact of polyvictimization*

"Polyvictimization refers to having experienced multiple victimizations such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying, and exposure to family violence. The definition emphasizes experiencing different kinds of victimization, rather than multiple episodes of the same kind of victimization."<sup>23</sup> The experience of polyvictimization can shape how, when, and why children may or may not disclose abuse. It can also give further context for the presentation of certain attributes of alleged victimizations. For instance, a youth experiencing homelessness who becomes involved in commercial sexual exploitation may consider this form of maltreatment to be the only opportunity they have to gain independence from an unsupportive or abusive home life. During a forensic interview, this dynamic may make it appear as though the youth is "protecting" the alleged perpetrator or that they believe they are "consenting" to their involvement in these types of crimes—when in fact, that does not reflect the youth's perspective on their overall situation. It also does not negate that the child may have potentially experienced victimization, regardless of their perspective on the matter. Holistically understanding the child's concurrent or historical experiences of abuse and maltreatment can contextualize the child's affect towards or orientation to this exploitation. Youth, particularly teens and adolescents, often analyze the current realities of their circumstances in comparison to the real or perceived potential ramifications or consequences of making a disclosure. For example, an older child might consider how a disclosure could shift or fracture relationships, contribute to a lack of resources, or abandonment by disbelieving caregivers. This can impact how and when they disclose and how they talk about their experiences.<sup>24</sup>

### *Team discussions on addressing concurrent illegal behaviors*

**In cases where a child or youth is concurrently accused of a crime or has previously been accused or charged with a crime, related or unrelated to an investigation of their own disclosure of abuse, prosecutors should be consulted at the onset of the case to ensure that the rights of everyone involved are protected.** Furthermore, by definition, a forensic interview should **only** be utilized as an information-gathering process with **alleged victims** of abuse and maltreatment. A forensic interview should **never** be used to garner confessions or to collect statements from alleged perpetrators, even if the alleged perpetrator or alleged initiator is a youth. People who are accused of crimes, including youth, have rights that must be upheld.

There are some circumstances, however, where an alleged child victim who has committed crimes or has engaged in illegal behavior will make disclosures and present within the child welfare or investigative system. In some cases, the involvement in illegal or criminal behavior is related to the experience of true abuse. For instance, youth may be recruited to help their alleged abuser shoplift or they may use substances with their alleged abuser.

MDTs should have intentional, macro-level discussions about how they will handle a youth's involvement in illegal behavior concurrent to their allegations of abuse and maltreatment. Consider

<sup>23</sup> D. Finkelhor et al., *Children's Exposure to Violence: A Comprehensive National Survey*, U.S. DEP'T OF JUST., OFF. OF JUV. JUST. & DELINQ. PROGRAMS (2009).

<sup>24</sup> R. Johnson et al., *Serving LGBTQIA2S+ Children and Families: A Guide for Forensic Interviewers and Multidisciplinary Teams Responding to Child Abuse* (ZERO ABUSE PROJECT, 2024).

how a team may proceed when faced with the following questions: If a youth says that they are afraid to disclose because they were using drugs at the time or were doing something they should not have been doing, how should the interviewer or investigative professional respond? In what circumstance may that response be different? Are there any circumstances where a forensic interview may need to be shut down or redirected based on a youth's organic statements or admissions?

In cases where there is suspicion that an alleged victim of child abuse has been involved in illegal behavior, "law enforcement should first seek to understand the youth's behavior and offer resources prior to punitive action. For example, when appropriate, officers could connect the youth with temporary or emergency housing, social services, or other supportive services in lieu of making an arrest."<sup>25</sup>

### *Offering choices*

Some youth that have experienced parentification or adultification may feel activated when adults assert themselves in a way that mirrors parent/child relationships or is perceived as asserting authority over the youth. This is more likely when the adult is someone with which the child does not have a history or good rapport. Being "treated like a child" can be challenging when a youth has had to take on so many adult roles and responsibilities. Offer options and choices as much as possible to teens and adolescents, in particular. Give context for why you are asking questions and what is going to happen next. Allow the youth to ask questions and be prepared to answer questions accurately and honestly.

### *Advocacy*

An advocate's role is to center the lived experience of each individual in their approach to offering support and affirmation. It can be helpful to provide separate advocacy for a youth and their non-offending caregiver(s) in cases where parentification or adultification may be a case dynamic, recognizing the two parties may have differing and, at times, conflicting needs and desired support.

### *Consider harm reduction*

Harm reduction refers to a range of intentional practices that are intended to lessen the negative social or physical consequences of different types of behavior, both legal and illegal. Depending on the dynamics in the youth's life, they may not be ready or want to stop engaging in behaviors the system recognizes as unsafe, harmful, or even illegal, such as self-injurious behavior, substance use or "high risk" consensual sexual behavior with peers. Advocacy, mental health, and other supportive professionals responding to youth victims of abuse and maltreatment should consider strategies for promoting the highest level of safety for the youth while being honest and realistic about the lived reality and current state of being of the youth. For instance, if a youth is prone to running away, it may be helpful to review shelter programs or drop-in centers that are safe for the youth. Many courts are

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<sup>25</sup> R. Johnson et al., *Serving LGBTQIA2S+ Children and Families: A Guide for Forensic Interviewers and Multidisciplinary Teams Responding to Child Abuse* (ZERO ABUSE PROJECT, 2024).

starting to examine the role of harm reduction in working with at-risk/at-promise children and youth.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

Parentification and adultification biases have the potential to deeply impact cases and case trajectories, as well as support and services offered to an alleged victim. MDTs and youth-serving professionals should examine how they perceive and categorize the behaviors of children and youth in their cases and explore how they recognize, perceive, and label youth behavior.

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<sup>26</sup> K. Hickie & S. Hallett, Mitigating Harm: Considering Harm Reduction Principles in Work with Sexually Exploited Young People, 30 CHILD. & SOC'Y 302 (2015).



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