

# Why Won't Society Let Black Girls Be Children?

Adultification means teachers, parents and law enforcement are less protective and more punitive with certain kids.

By **A. Rochaun Meadows-Fernandez**

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Punishment was a hallmark of my educational experience.

It started when my preschool teacher labeled me as manipulative and intentionally disruptive. She even tried to film me to prove to my mother I was a problem — she never got that footage, and accused me of pretending to behave at the sight of the camera.

Although I was only 3 years old, she was convinced that my insistent hand raising and refusal to sit still were signs that I was malicious instead of simply understimulated. As soon as I was old enough to understand what happened, my mom didn't hesitate to tell me the story each time I expressed self-doubt. She wanted me to understand I wasn't a problem, I was simply an engaged learner. In a world where falling in line was more important than shining, my strengths were a threat.

That experience set the tone for the rest of my schooling. “Disruptive,” “talkative,” and “distraction” were used almost as often as my name. It meant being paddled a lot, calls home to my mother and isolation from other students as punishment.

By high school, I stopped participating almost completely; it was easier to focus on boys than be misunderstood in the classroom.

*[Why America's black mothers and babies are in a life-or-death crisis.]*

At the time, I didn't know that my experiences weren't uncommon. I was experiencing what academics call “adultification,” in which teachers, law enforcement officials and even parents view black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers. This perspective often categorizes black girls as disruptive and malicious for age-appropriate behaviors.

Adultification means black girls are punished more frequently, even when they're under 6. According to a report from the Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection, from 2013-2014, only 20 percent of female preschoolers were black, but black girls made up 54 percent of female preschool children with one or more suspensions.

Now that I'm a grown woman raising a black girl, I'm at a crossroads. How can I preserve my daughter's childhood while preparing her for a world that may judge her prematurely?

Jamilia Blake, Ph.D., a psychologist and associate professor at Texas A&M University who co-authored the 2019 report “Listening to Black Women and Girls: Lived Experiences of Adultification Bias” and its precursor, the 2017 study “Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood,” said adultification impacts black girls early in life.

Black girls are treated like they are older than they are as early as preschool, Blake found. Unfortunately, the way others perceive Black girls gets worse with age. In one report, a young adult described her family's difficulty finding an elementary school that would accept her after an allegation of assault and battery was added to her record when a ball she threw at recess hit another girl in the face.

Blake's work explores how sexism and racism interact to shape our experiences in education, criminal justice and even our social relationships. Her research, which was published in collaboration with the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, suggests that bias toward black girls can lead to less protection and support, and more punishment, among educators and law enforcement.

*[I'm darker than my daughter. Here's why it matters.]*

The National Women's Law Center's report “Dress Coded: Black Girls, Bodies, and Bias in D.C. Schools” concluded that dress code policy enforcement unfairly targeted black girls, echoing anecdotal evidence that every part of black girlhood — from their hair to their bodies and attire — has the potential to be penalized.

In short, the world ages black girls up, which leaves them unable to access the privileges of childhood, like the benefit of the doubt in punishment situations and support figures like mentors.

According to Joy Harden Bradford, Ph.D., a psychologist and host of the Therapy for Black Girls podcast, black girls are often characterized as “little women.” Teachers, and even parents, may expect black girls to exceed age-appropriate levels of responsibility at home or assume they don't need to be comforted after emotionally distressing events, according to researchers.

Dr. Bradford said adultification surfaces in the chores parents assign to black girls — many are burdened with household caretaking responsibilities from an early age. Adultification even shows up in how we criticize black girls' clothing in ways we wouldn't with boys. Within the black community, calling our girls “fast” or suggesting that they “want to be grown” and deserve whatever consequences they face for their choices ages them and robs them of their innocence.

*[Teaching your child to confront sticks, stones and ‘that word.’]*

Blake noted that both black boys and girls experience adultification, though it can show up differently depending on a child's gender. “We need to understand the unique experiences of black girls and black women so we can better support and empower them,” she explained.

At 1 year old, I've heard many people describe my daughter's temperament as mean, sassy or intentionally difficult. The language makes me uncomfortable. But, if I'm honest, I've made these sorts of comments myself.

As a former victim of adultification, giving my daughter the childhood she deserves is my priority. It's up to me to ensure she has the tools to thrive in the face of bias.

Experts I spoke to said it's important to let my kid be a kid.

“Keeping little girls engaged in play as long as possible is important,” Dr. Bradford advised.

Words matter, too.

Blake said awareness of adultification, self-reflection and being careful about language choices are the first steps. This might involve calling out how adults speak to and about children in your community.

“I believe that black parents should be very explicit when communicating with their children and other adults about the descriptions of black girls' behavior,” Blake said, pointing out the importance of correcting adults who use negative language to describe black youth.

I plan to listen for phrases the like the ones that were used to punish me for being inquisitive and involved in school. Statements like, “Her grades are good but she's disruptive in class” or “She's intentionally challenging my authority” will be causes for further investigation.

“As black parents, I know that we are tasked with having conversations with our children that others do not have to have, but it's also important to have these conversations in a way that's developmentally appropriate,” Dr. Bradford added.

A 6-year-old might not be ready for an in-depth conversation on how race and sexism make school harder for her. But she can understand the concept that there are people who treat girls differently than boys, or treat people unfairly based on how they look. When your child inevitably asks why, it's O.K. to say you don't know and to reassure her that all people deserve to be treated with love, kindness and respect.

There's no shortage of identity-related curveballs thrown at black children. It's important that we allow them to experience childhood and its related benefits for as long as possible. We owe it to black girls to challenge the obstacles in their way.

My childhood was compromised, but it's not too late for my daughter.

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