

Strip searching a child without appropriate consent is 'sexual abuse,' insists expert

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Strip searching a child without appropriate consent is "sexual abuse," and should attract heavy sanctions—backed up by legislation—for any UK police officer who does it, insists a leading pediatrician in an opinion piece, published online in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood*.

Unless the officer(s) can legitimately justify their actions to an independent panel, they should be instantly dismissed and compelled to sign the Sex Offenders Register, writes pediatrician Professor Andy Bush of Imperial College, London.

He cites the "shocking number" of children strip-searched by [police](#) in England and Wales—2,847 8- to 17-year-olds between 2018 and mid-2022.

More than half these searches were carried out in the absence of an appropriate adult, with Black children six times more likely than [white children](#) to be subjected to the procedure, according to a recent report from the Children's Commissioner for England, he says.

The police should adopt the strict protocols used by doctors for any [physical examination](#) of a [child](#), he suggests.

Age-appropriate consent or assent from the child, and the presence of an appropriate adult who has given their consent to whatever is proposed, are prerequisites for a [medical examination](#), he explains.

Even in cases where an older child who is an inpatient and who knows the medical team well, and is happy to be examined in the absence of an appropriate adult, remote consent from the parent would be sought, and a known and trusted chaperone would be in attendance, he points out.

Clearly, a physical examination or procedure is sometimes urgently needed because the child is in immediate danger of serious harm or death. But again, the opinion of a senior colleague as to the wisdom of proceeding, would usually be sought, he says.

The time has now come to ban strip searching of minors in the absence of an appropriate adult, argues Professor Bush.

If the child is suspected of carrying drugs or a weapon, they should be detained in a safe and age-appropriate facility while arrangements for a search can be made. And If there's no alternative to a search, this must be in a place of privacy, in the presence of a known and trusted

chaperone, and carefully documented, he writes.

"It is inconceivable that more than 500 children/year needed to be strip-searched to prevent imminent physical harm and, indeed, it is very difficult to think of any circumstances whereby an immediate strip search to prevent serious harm is essential," he suggests.

Formal guidance should be issued to the police to protect children as a matter of urgency, but this must be unequivocal in tone. "As with an adult, so with a child, removing someone's clothing without consent is [sexual abuse](#)," he insists.

"There needs to be an immediate and clear statement that any [police officer](#) who strip searches a child without a parent or caregiver present will be immediately dismissed and compelled to sign the Sex Offenders Register unless they can justify their actions to an independent panel, including a senior pediatrician and at least one lay person of the same ethnic group as the child," he explains.

"The presumption must be that such a [search](#) was abusive until proven otherwise. There is no reason why these steps cannot be immediately enacted," he suggests.

He concludes, "If the police are serious about regaining the public's trust, which has been further eroded by the recent barrage of evidence-based reports of institutional racism and abuse of power, they should act now, and UK Governments and Assemblies should follow rapidly with legislation."

More information: Strip searching by the police: potential for abuse?, *Archives of Disease in Childhood* (2023). [DOI: 10.1136/archdischild-2023-325683](#)

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