

PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR AGE ASSESSMENT OF YOUNG UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM SEEKERS

Assessment of age is a complex task, which is a process and not an exact science. This is further complicated by many of the young people attempting to portray a different age from their true age.

In completing the assessment, please be mindful that clients have the right to legally challenge the conclusion.

UNICEF publishes the figure of 50 million children who are currently not registered at birth, depriving them of nationality, a legal name and proof of when they were born. Many societies calculate age in a different way from the method used in the UK; internationally millions of young people do not know their age. The Royal College of Paediatricians (1999) states that “in practice, age determination is extremely difficult to do with certainty. More over, for young people aged 15 to 18 it is even less possible to be certain about age”.

Young unaccompanied asylum seekers both at the ports of entry, and as in country applicants, sometimes give a stated age that is disputed by the immigration authorities. The Home Office will often, based purely on appearance, judge the young person to be an adult and refer directly to NASS. A proportion of young people are referred to the local social services department for an assessment of age. Additionally young asylum seekers self refer to social services and an assessment of their age becomes necessary.

A young person’s age is a key part of the information needed when making an assessment of need and subsequently for the appropriate provision of service. The Local Authority has a responsibility under the Children Act 1989 to assess whether a young person is in need and to provide services to safeguard and promote welfare.

It is important to explain to the young person that an assessment must be undertaken in order to identify what services may be provided . An assessment of age concluding that the asylum seeker is a minor will become an important component of the initial assessment.

The task of the assessing worker is to assess from a holistic perspective, and in the light of the available information, to be able to make an informed judgement that the person is probably within a certain age parameter. It is a process of professional judgment.

Age assessments are sometimes undertaken at the port of entry and the asylum screening unit where a decision is required in a short period of time, or sometimes at a later stage. In circumstances of age uncertainty, the benefit of doubt should always be the standard practice. When practical, two assessing workers is beneficial. Age assessments are also undertaken following the acceptance of a referral to social services to ascertain if the person is entitled to a service as a child. However, in some Local Authorities age assessments are undertaken on presentation when the stated age is disputed. Here the assessment can sometimes be undertaken over a period of time, and involve other professionals, for example residential social work staff, foster carers, doctors, panel advisors, teachers and other young people.

It is very important to ensure that the young person understands the role of the assessing worker, and comprehends the interpreter. Attention should also be paid to the level of tiredness, trauma, bewilderment and anxiety that may be present for the young person. The ethnicity, culture, and customs of the person being assessed must be a key focus throughout the assessment.

It is also important to be mindful of the “coaching” that the asylum seeker may have had prior to arrival, in how to behave and what to say. Having clarified the role of the social services, it is important to engage with the person and establish as much rapport as the circumstances will allow. This process is sometimes known as “joining”. The assessing worker needs to acknowledge with the young person that they will have had to already answer many questions, and that it may be difficult and distressing to answer some of the questions.

In utilising the assessment framework, the practitioner should ask open-ended, non - leading questions. It is not expected that the form should be completed by systematically going through each component, but rather by formulating the interview in a semi structured discussion gathering information at different stages. The use of circular questioning is a useful method, as it is less obvious to the person being assessed that the questions relate directly to age, and hence may reveal a clear picture of age - related issues.

It is essential to feed back to the young person the conclusion of this assessment and a written form is included for this purpose. It is essential to feed back to the young person, the conclusion of this assessment, and a detachable form is included for this purpose.

AGE ASSESSMENT OF UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM SEEKING CHILD

Name of UASC:

DOB UASC is claiming:

Name of Assessing Worker:

Date of Assessment:

1) Physical Appearance, Demeanour

All assessments begin with initial impressions, made from visual presentation.

An initial hypothesis of age range is formed based on height, facial features (facial hair, skin lines/folds, etc), voice tone, and general impression.

It is important to consider racial differences here e.g. It is normal in some cultures for boys to have facial hair at an early age and for girls to develop at different ages.

Life experiences and trauma may impact on the ageing process, bear this in mind.

Demeanour, it is essential to take account of how the person presents, style, attitude and authority and relate this to the culture of the country of origin and events preceding the interview, journey experiences etc.

It is useful to establish the length of time that the person has taken to arrive in the UK from the time they left their country of origin and include this into the age calculation.

It is important to note both the verbal and non-verbal (body language) behaviour of the person. The practitioner conducting the assessment should be observing factors such as the manner in which the person copes with the assessment, does he or she appear confident or overwhelmed, does the person appear to take a "one down" position or not.

Take account of differing cultural terms, e.g. some people may believe it impolite to make direct eye contact.

But remember to be aware of cultural variations in attitudes to elders.

Does the person appear to be uncomfortable with speaking to an adult?

Keep in mind that your position will be seen as one of power, which may influence the way the person interacts with you; your role needs to be clarified and the differences in the roles of social services and the Home Office.

A social history.

Do indicate to the young person that you are aware that talking about their family may be very painful and difficult for them; for some, it may be too painful to open up at this time. This must be understood and respected.

It is important to clarify the nature of their parent and sibling relationships as some cultures for example, call a half-brother their brother, or stepmother their mother.

Additionally ask if either parent had more than one wife / husband.

2) Interaction of Person During Assessment

The manner in which the person interacts with the assessing worker conducting the assessment will provide an indication of whether or not the person is responding in an age appropriate manner.

3) Social History and Family Composition

Establishing as detailed as possible, a family tree will help the assessing worker to identify the likely age of the person compared with the stated age. Ages of parents, siblings and extended family should be established. In the case of deceased family members, the year and age at the time of death should be recorded. Drawing a graphic family tree is useful where names of family members and ages can be included, which may help the person to be more accurate whilst also allowing the person to feel involved. The information gained may indicate discrepancies or impossibilities, which need to be clarified.

Remember to use open-ended questions, as this will allow for the person to disclose information without prompting.

Cultural considerations need to be taken into account as in some cultures it could be normal for a young teenager to be working full-time. A person may appear to answer a question about alcohol in a shy manner because their religion does not allow for this.

“Tell me what you did in your spare time” is the sort of question that can give an idea of the age appropriate interests and activities. Remember to relate answers to what would be appropriate in the young persons country of origin and culture.

Ask about peer relationships at school / work / neighbourhood

Questions about age related rituals should be asked; including forced marriage, and any sexual relationships.

Does what the person is describing seem age appropriate?

Remember that some young people may possible have been involved in armed conflict, have been child soldiers, involved in sexual exploitation and may have experienced a number of traumatic situations.

Answering questions related to many of the above may be too difficult and painful until a relationship of trust has been established.

Arranging for a person to be involved in social situations with other young people of the age stated and observing

4) Developmental Considerations

Questions about the types of activities and roles that the person was involved in prior to arriving in the UK can often give an indication of age.

5) Education

Obtaining a detailed account of the person's educational history is a valuable source in the age assessment process.

Listed below are important facts that need to be gained:

Age at which school was started

Number of completed years spent in any school.

Establish if there were any gaps in education and if so, how long was the gap/s and why.

Adding the number of years of school attendance to the age school was started at, including possible disruptions in schooling should equate to the stated age.

Names and addresses of schools attended.

Subjects studied.

Gaining knowledge or consulting with experts educated in different countries, is useful to validate the authenticity of the information provided.

It may be possible to contact schools in some countries of origin.

e.g., it may be of use to know that it is the norm to have six years of junior and six years of senior school in some countries.

Has the person lived at home or have they lived on their own/in an independent setting?

Is there a clear impression that the person has never lived away from home and has been cared for by adults?

Does the person have experience in managing money, paying bills, arranging appointments, buying food and other supplies etc?

Is the person able to cook more than just a basic meal?

It is essential to take account of the local situation from which the person has come from – e.g. war, famine etc; and of cultural norms, for example it may not be expected that men should have any domestic skills in some countries.

Has the person stated a preference during the assessment of how they wish to live in the UK?

Would this person be at risk living independently? Give reasons for this.

The assessing worker, may wish to pose a scenario to the person at this point or at the end of the assessment; that if the person is believed to be under 16 he or she will be placed in foster care where certain house rules will have to be followed, and be expected to be home at a certain times etc. The reaction to this may provide valuable information.

6) Independent/ Self-Care Skills

Understanding the level of ability, experience and confidence that a person has in being able to care for themselves can be an indicator of age.

The assessing worker may wish to ask the person directly how they feel about living in an independent setting and observe their reaction.

7) Health and Medical Assessment

A medical opinion and view on age will always be helpful

Questions about the person's health history can be informative in assessing age, both from the information given and the reactions to specific questions.

The Royal College of Paediatricians advised in November 1999 that there can be a five-year error in age assessment, invasive methods and medically unnecessary examinations of course should never be used. However, opinions and views on age from a paediatrician, GP, dentist and optician can be very helpful in assisting in the process.



8) Information from documentation and Other Sources

Documentation when available should always be carefully checked; authenticating documents however, is a specialist task.

If the assessment is an ongoing process, it is important to obtain the views of other significant figures involved with the young person.

Other sources may include foster carers, residential workers, school teachers, panel advisors, doctors, solicitors, interpreters and other young people.

Observations of how the person interacts in different social situations can provide useful age indicators.



Key indicators of the conclusion.

The assessing worker should draw together the information obtained, and present his/her views and judgement on the age of the person being assessed, giving clear reasons for the conclusion. If this differs from the stated age, clear reasons for this disagreement should be given.

Please remember this process is not an exact science and that conclusions should always give the benefit of doubt.

9) Analysis of information gained

Conclusion of the assessment

10) Conclusion

BASED ON THE ASSESSMENT, THE CLIENTS AGE IS:

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DOB IS ESTIMATED TO BE:

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Form to be handed to the person assessed

AGE ASSESSMENT FORM

Name:	
Nationality:	Port Ref No:
Claimed Age/DOB:	Home Office Ref No:
Name & Address of Local Authority Undertaking Assessment:	
Name of Assessing Worker:	Date of Assessment:
You have been assessed to be over 18: <input type="checkbox"/>	
You have been assessed to be a child, age: <input type="text"/> Years; DOB: <input style="width: 100px;" type="text"/>	
Your assessment is inconclusive and further work is necessary: <input type="checkbox"/>	
Conclusions and Reasons for this:	
<i>It was explained to you at the end of your interview that you have the right to disagree with the outcome of the assessment, and to challenge our decision; you may do so by contacting a manager at the Children's Asylum Service at Hillingdon Social Services on 01895 277031, or by requesting the 'Complaints Procedure for Children and Young People' on the same number.</i>	