

Child Abuse Linked To Faith Or Belief

Abuse linked to faith or belief is where concerns for a child's welfare have been identified, and could be caused by, a belief in witchcraft, spirit or demonic possession, ritual or satanic abuse features; or when practices linked to faith or belief are harmful to a child.

Any abuse that takes place against those who are branded (or labelled) either as a witch or as having been possessed by an evil spirit is unacceptable. Significant harm (including murder) can occur because of concerted efforts to 'excise' or 'deliver' evil from a child (or vulnerable adult).

From our own experience and in consultation with communities, we know this kind of abuse is under-reported.

Spotting the signs that this abuse exists can prevent escalation from 'subtle' harms that may often go unnoticed by many, to 'extreme' situations where there is loss of life. Witchcraft beliefs are used to blame a person (rather than circumstances) for misfortune that happens in life.

It can take place for some of the following reasons:

- abuse as a result of a child being accused of being a 'witch'
- abuse as a result of a child being accused of being possessed by 'evil spirits'
- ritualistic abuse which is prolonged sexual, physical and psychological abuse
- satanic abuse which is carried out in the name of 'satan' and may have links to cults
- any other harmful practice linked to a belief or faith

The forms of abuse that can occur fall into the four main categories below.

Physical abuse

This can involve ritualistic beating, burning, cutting, stabbing, semi-strangulating, tying up the child, or rubbing chilli peppers or other substances on the child's genitals or eyes.

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse can occur in the form of isolation. A child may not be allowed near or to share a room with family members, and threatened with abandonment. The child may also be convinced that they are possessed.

Neglect

In situations of neglect, the child's family and community may have failed to ensure appropriate medical care, supervision, education, good hygiene, nourishment, clothing or warmth.

Sexual abuse

Children who have been singled out in this way can be particularly vulnerable to sexual abusers within the family, community or faith organisation. These people exploit the belief as a form of control or threat.

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Where does it happen?

Child abuse linked to faith or belief is not confined to one faith, nationality or ethnic community. Examples have been recorded worldwide across various religions including Christians, Muslims and Hindus.

The number of known cases suggests that only a small minority of people who believe in witchcraft or spirit possession go on to abuse children and adults.

Abuse may happen anywhere, but it most commonly occurs within the child's home.

Common factors and causes

A range of factors can contribute to the abuse of a child for reasons of faith or belief.

Some of the most common ones are below.

Belief in evil spirits

Belief in evil spirits that can 'possess' children is often accompanied by a belief that a possessed child can 'infect' others with the condition. This could be through contact with shared food, or simply being in the presence of the child.

Scapegoating

A child could be singled out as the cause of misfortune within the home, such as financial difficulties, divorce, infidelity, illness or death.

Bad behaviour

Sometimes bad or abnormal behaviour is attributed to spiritual forces. Examples include a child being disobedient, rebellious, overly independent, wetting the bed, having nightmares or falling ill.

Physical and emotional differences

A child could be singled out for having a physical difference or disability. Documented cases included children with learning disabilities, mental health issues, epilepsy, autism, stammers, deafness and LGBTQ+.

Gifts and uncommon characteristics

If a child has a particular skill or talent, this can sometimes be rationalised as the result of possession or witchcraft. This can also be the case if the child is from a multiple or difficult pregnancy.

Complex family structure

Research suggests that a child living with extended family, non biological parents, or foster parents is more at risk. In these situations they are more likely to have been subject to trafficking and made to work in servitude.

What to look out for

Indicators of child abuse linked to faith or belief include the following:

- physical injuries, such as bruises or burns (including historical injuries/scaring)

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- a child reporting that they are or have been accused of being 'evil', and/or that they are having the 'devil beaten out of them'
- the child or family may use words such as 'kindoki', 'djin', 'juju' or 'voodoo' - all of which refer to spiritual beliefs
- a child becoming noticeably confused, withdrawn, disorientated or isolated and appearing alone amongst other children
- a child's personal care deteriorating (eg rapid loss of weight, being hungry, turning up to school without food or lunch money, being unkempt with dirty clothes)
- it may be evident that the child's parent or carer does not have a close bond with the child
- a child's attendance at school or college becomes irregular or there is a deterioration in a child's performance
- a child is taken out of a school altogether without another school place having been arranged
- Wearing unusual jewellery/items or in possession of strange ornaments/scripts.

Project Violet and how to report belief or faith-based abuse

There are a numbers of laws in the UK that allow the prosecution of those responsible for abuse linked to faith or belief. One of the biggest challenges is raising awareness and encouraging victims and witnesses to come forward.

Project Violet is the MPS response to these challenges. We work with professionals, communities and faith leaders to develop prevention strategies and initiatives that can help educate and raise awareness of faith and belief-based abuse.

Our team is available to provide advice, support and guidance for referrals and investigations.

If you suspect child abuse is taking place, please get in touch. Visit our [How to report possible child abuse page](#) to find out more.

Useful links

[AFRUCA: Africans Unite Against Child Abuse](#)

A UK charity advocating the rights and welfare of African children.

[Barnardo's National FGM Centre](#)

This provides a comprehensive overview of CALFB. It covers what CALFB is, health implications, justifications for it, the law and signs that a child could be at risk

[Child trafficking Advice Centre \(CTAC\)](#)

A team that provides advice for professionals responsible for safeguarding children from trafficking.

[Thirtyone:eight](#)

An independent Christian charity which helps individuals, organisations, charities, faith and community groups to protect vulnerable people from abuse.

Phone: 0207 735 8941

[The Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network](#)

WHRIN's work enables greater understanding and awareness of these complex issues

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so that solutions can be developed to prevent further violations of human rights from taking place

Useful publications

[National Schools Safeguarding Guidance \(developed by Metropolitan Police Service\)](#)

The Guidance for Schools and Colleges: Safeguarding Children from Sexual Violence, CSE and Harmful Practices has a chapter on CALFB.

[Schools Charter on Ending Harmful Practices](#)

This Schools Charter encourages the delivery of high quality, safeguarding focused inputs on harmful practices.

UK Government: [National Action Plan to Tackle Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief](#)

Source:

<https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/caa/child-abuse/faith-based-abuse/>