Organised Ritual Abuse

This FAQ provides an overview of organised ritual abuse, including its terminology, reported characteristics, alleged perpetrators, victim experiences, investigations and the challenges involved in identifying and documenting abuse.

It distinguishes between documented forms of organised abuse, allegations of ritualised abuse, and claims that have not been independently substantiated. The purpose is to provide clear, factual information without dismissing survivors or presenting unverified claims as established facts.

General questions

1. What is organised ritual abuse?

Organised ritual abuse is a term used to describe alleged or documented patterns of abuse involving multiple perpetrators, one or more victims, and the use of ritualised activities, beliefs, symbolism or ceremonies in connection with the abuse.

Reported forms of abuse may include physical violence, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, intimidation, humiliation, confinement and coercive control.

The term is not a single, universally agreed legal or clinical diagnosis. It is important to distinguish organised abuse, which is recognised in safeguarding and criminal investigations, from particular allegations concerning ritual activity, which must be assessed individually.

2. Is organised ritual abuse the same as organised abuse?

No. Organised abuse is a broader term covering abuse involving multiple perpetrators, victims or networks.

It can occur within:

- Families and extended family networks.
- Residential care settings.
- Religious or spiritual communities.
- Schools and other institutions.
- Social groups and criminal networks.
- Online networks.

Ritualised behaviour or belief systems may be associated with some allegations of organised abuse, but they are not a necessary feature of organised abuse.

3. Is ritual abuse recognised by authorities?

Yes, harmful abuse involving ritualistic or spiritual practices is recognised in safeguarding and law-enforcement guidance.

For example, UK police guidance addresses child abuse linked to faith or belief, including harmful practices involving accusations of witchcraft, spirit possession and ritualistic abuse. The Crown Prosecution Service also updated its guidance in February 2026 to include spiritual and ritualistic abuse within its wider guidance on harmful practices.

Recognition of these forms of harm does not mean that every allegation of an organised ritual abuse network has been established as fact.

4. What is the difference between ritual abuse and spiritual abuse?

Ritual abuse generally refers to abuse in which ritualised activities, ceremonies, symbolism or beliefs are incorporated into the abusive behaviour.

Spiritual abuse involves the misuse of spiritual or religious beliefs, authority or practices to manipulate, control, intimidate or harm another person.

Spiritual abuse can occur without physical or sexual violence. Ritual abuse may involve spiritual themes, but it does not necessarily involve a recognised religion or established spiritual tradition.

5. Does organised ritual abuse always involve Satanism?

No. Allegations of ritual abuse have been associated with a variety of religious, spiritual, occult and non-religious themes.

It would be inaccurate to associate ritual abuse with Satanism, paganism, witchcraft or any other religious or spiritual tradition as a whole. The beliefs of a community should not be confused with the actions of individuals who commit abuse.

6. Does organised ritual abuse always involve a large organisation?

No. Organised abuse can involve relatively small groups, informal networks, families or larger groups of perpetrators.

The term organised does not necessarily mean that there is a formal organisation, central leadership, written hierarchy or extensive membership. Research into organised child sexual exploitation has identified networks with varying degrees of structure and coordination.

Forms and characteristics of abuse

7. What forms of abuse may be involved?

Depending on the circumstances, reported or documented forms of abuse may include:

- Physical abuse and assault.
- Sexual abuse and exploitation.
- Psychological and emotional abuse.
- Threats, intimidation and coercion.

- Confinement and isolation.
- Humiliation and degradation.
- Neglect and deprivation.
- Financial exploitation.
- Trafficking and exploitation.
- Abuse involving religious or spiritual beliefs.

Different forms of abuse may occur together.

8. What is ritualised abuse?

Ritualised abuse involves the repetition of actions, procedures, symbols or ceremonies as part of abusive behaviour.

Rituals may be used to create fear, establish control, humiliate victims or reinforce the authority of perpetrators.

The presence of ritualised behaviour does not, by itself, establish the existence of a particular organisation, belief system or coordinated network.

9. Can organised abuse involve multiple generations?

Yes. Abuse can occur across generations within families and other social networks.

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Children may be exposed to abuse by relatives or other adults who have access to them through family relationships, community connections or positions of authority.

However, claims that an entire family or community is involved should be investigated on the basis of individual evidence rather than assumptions about family membership.

10. Can organised abuse take place within institutions?

Yes. Organised and complex abuse can occur in institutional environments, including residential care, schools, religious organisations, sports clubs and other settings where adults have access to children.

Institutional abuse may involve individuals working together, exploiting positions of authority, concealing misconduct or failing to protect vulnerable people.

11. Can organised abuse involve trafficking?

Yes. Human trafficking and exploitation can involve multiple perpetrators, networks and locations.

Victims may be moved, transferred or exploited by different individuals. Trafficking can involve sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude and other forms of exploitation.

Not every case of organised abuse involves trafficking.

12. Can perpetrators use religion or spirituality to justify abuse?

Yes. Religious or spiritual beliefs can be misused to justify harmful practices, demand obedience, create fear or discourage victims from seeking help.

Examples include:

- Threatening someone with supernatural punishment.
- Claiming that a victim is possessed or evil.
- Using religious authority to demand unquestioning obedience.
- Presenting violence as a form of purification or deliverance.
- Using spiritual teachings to justify exploitation.

These behaviours are forms of abuse when they are used to harm, intimidate or control another person.

Victims and survivor experiences

13. Who can become a victim of organised ritual abuse?

Anyone can become a victim of abuse, regardless of age, sex, gender, ethnicity, religion, social background or economic circumstances.

Children and vulnerable adults may be particularly susceptible to exploitation because of their dependence on others, limited power, isolation or inability to protect themselves.

14. Can children be targeted?

Yes. Children can be targeted by individuals, families, groups and organised networks.

Child abuse may involve grooming, manipulation, threats, physical violence, sexual exploitation and psychological coercion.

Children may be particularly vulnerable when perpetrators are relatives, carers, trusted adults or people in positions of authority.

15. Why might victims find it difficult to disclose abuse?

There are several possible reasons, including:

- Fear of retaliation.
- Threats against family members or loved ones.
- Shame, humiliation or embarrassment.
- Fear of not being believed.
- Dependence on perpetrators.
- Isolation from supportive people.
- Grooming and manipulation.

- Confusion about what has happened.
- Fear of losing their home, family or support network.

Disclosure may occur gradually rather than as a single account.

16. Can victims experience psychological trauma?

Yes. Prolonged physical, sexual and psychological abuse can have serious psychological consequences.

Possible effects include:

- Anxiety and persistent fear.
- Depression.
- Sleep disturbances and nightmares.
- Difficulties with trust and relationships.
- Shame and feelings of helplessness.
- Dissociation.
- Post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- Difficulties with emotional regulation.

Not every survivor experiences the same effects, and symptoms alone cannot establish the circumstances in which abuse occurred.

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17. Can victims experience dissociation?

Yes. Dissociation can occur in response to overwhelming stress and trauma.

It may involve feelings of detachment, emotional numbness, altered awareness, or difficulties recalling aspects of an experience.

Dissociation is not exclusive to organised ritual abuse and cannot independently establish that a person has experienced a particular form of abuse.

18. Can survivors have memory difficulties?

Yes. Some survivors of trauma report difficulties recalling events, remembering sequences or accessing particular autobiographical memories.

However, memory is complex and can be influenced by many factors. Neither fragmented memories nor strong subjective certainty independently establish the accuracy of a particular recollection.

Accounts should be approached sensitively and assessed without leading questions or pressure.

Evidence and investigations

19. How can organised ritual abuse be investigated?

Investigations should follow established safeguarding and criminal investigation procedures.

Depending on the allegations, relevant evidence may include:

- First-hand witness accounts.
- Medical and forensic findings.
- Photographs, recordings and other documentation.
- Digital communications.
- Financial records.
- Records from schools, hospitals or social services.
- Evidence identifying relationships between suspects.
- Independent witness testimony.
- Evidence of repeated offending or coordinated activity.

Investigators should consider each allegation individually and avoid treating assumptions as established facts.

20. Why can organised abuse be difficult to investigate?

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Investigations may be complicated by:

- Multiple suspects and victims.
- Abuse occurring over extended periods.
- Different geographical locations.
- Intimidation and threats.
- Delayed disclosures.
- Limited surviving documentation.
- Perpetrators using aliases or concealed identities.
- Institutional failures to report or investigate concerns.
- Difficulties establishing connections between individuals.

These challenges are also encountered in other forms of organised and group-based child abuse.

21. Have organised abuse networks been documented?

Yes. Organised and group-based child sexual exploitation networks have been documented and investigated in the UK.

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) examined organised networks involved in child sexual exploitation. Its work demonstrated that multiple perpetrators can cooperate, facilitate abuse and exploit children through connected networks.

However, evidence of organised child sexual exploitation should not automatically be treated as evidence of every additional allegation associated with ritual abuse.

22. Is there a universally accepted definition of organised ritual abuse?

No. Terminology varies between academic literature, safeguarding organisations, survivor organisations and law-enforcement agencies.

Terms encountered in literature include:

- Organised ritual abuse.
- Ritual abuse.
- Organised abuse.
- Multiple-perpetrator abuse.
- Organised sadistic abuse.
- Group-based child sexual exploitation.
- Abuse linked to faith or belief.

These terms overlap in some contexts but are not interchangeable.

23. Are allegations of ritual abuse always substantiated?

No. Allegations must be evaluated individually.

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Some cases of organised abuse and abuse involving ritualistic or spiritual practices are documented. Other allegations may lack sufficient independent evidence, remain unresolved or be disputed.

A responsible investigation must neither dismiss allegations automatically nor assume that every reported event has been established.

24. What is the controversy surrounding ritual abuse allegations?

Ritual abuse allegations have been the subject of considerable controversy, particularly since the 1980s and 1990s.

Debates have involved:

- The reliability of childhood memories.
- The influence of suggestive interviewing.
- The distinction between genuine abuse and unsubstantiated allegations.
- The interpretation of unusual or ritualised behaviour.
- The standards of evidence required in criminal investigations.
- The role of therapists and other professionals.

Academic literature has emphasised the importance of considering alternative explanations and distinguishing therapeutic work from forensic assessment.

25. Can memories of abuse be recovered during therapy?

People sometimes report remembering previously inaccessible experiences during therapy. However, memory recovery is a complex subject.

Trauma-informed professionals should avoid leading questions, memory-recovery techniques that presume particular events occurred, or pressure to produce additional memories.

26. Does a survivor need physical evidence to receive support?

No. Someone can seek medical care, psychological support and safeguarding assistance without first proving that abuse occurred.

The purpose of therapeutic support is to address distress, safety and wellbeing. Establishing criminal responsibility is a separate process requiring appropriate investigation and evidence.

Support and safeguarding

27. What should someone do if they believe a child is currently being abused?

Immediate safeguarding concerns should be reported to the appropriate child protection authorities or police.

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If a child is in immediate danger, contact emergency services.

It is important to:

- Take disclosures seriously.
- Listen without judgement.
- Avoid interrogating the child.
- Avoid asking leading questions.
- Record the child's own words where possible.
- Preserve relevant evidence.
- Follow safeguarding procedures.

28. What should survivors consider when seeking professional help?

Survivors may benefit from professionals experienced in childhood abuse, sexual violence, complex trauma and dissociation.

A suitable professional should:

- Respect the survivor's autonomy.
- Avoid making assumptions about what happened.
- Avoid imposing explanations on memories or symptoms.
- Understand the effects of coercion and intimidation.
- Prioritise safety and emotional stability.

- Maintain appropriate professional boundaries.
- Distinguish therapeutic support from forensic investigation.

29. Can survivors receive support if they do not wish to report the abuse?

Yes. Survivors can seek confidential support and discuss their options without necessarily making a police report.

Confidentiality has legal and professional limits, particularly where there are immediate safeguarding concerns or risks to children and vulnerable people.

30. What is the most important consideration when discussing organised ritual abuse?

The most important consideration is the safety, dignity and wellbeing of people who may have experienced abuse.

Discussions should be evidence-informed, respectful and free from sensationalism. Documented cases of organised abuse should be acknowledged, while specific allegations about perpetrators, organisations and activities should be assessed carefully.

Survivors should not be pressured to disclose experiences, accept particular interpretations of their memories or provide evidence to justify receiving support.

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