



## **Child Abuse linked to Faith or Belief**

### **1. Definition and Concerns**

#### **1.1 Definition of 'Belief in Spirit Possession'**

The term 'belief in spirit possession' is the belief that an evil force has entered a child and is controlling him or her. Sometimes the term 'witch' is used and is the belief that a child is able to use an evil force to harm others. There is also a range of other language that is connected to such abuse. This includes black magic, kindoki, ndoki, the evil eye, djinns, voodoo, obeah, demons, and child sorcerers. In all these cases, genuine beliefs can be held by families, carers, religious leaders, congregations, and the children themselves that evil forces are at work. Families and children can be deeply worried by the evil that they believe is threatening them, and abuse often occurs when an attempt is made to 'exorcise', or 'deliver' the child. Exorcism is the attempt to expel evil spirits from a child. (See report: [Guidance - Child abuse linked to faith or belief: national action plan](#))

The belief in 'possession' or 'witchcraft' is widespread. It is not confined to particular countries, cultures or specific religions, nor is it confined to new immigrant communities in this country.

Any concerns about a child which arise in this context must be taken seriously.

Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 empowers local authorities to investigate a referral that a child may have suffered or is at risk of suffering harm. Whilst the Children Act 1989 does not mention the terms witchcraft or spirit possession, it does clarify what constitutes child abuse, which can include harm through witchcraft or spirit possession.

#### **1.2 Concerns**

A number of faith groups have beliefs, which affect how they use health services and specifically treatment and immunisations for children. A number of churches and faith groups believe in the power of prayers and faith in God and as a result may refuse medical interventions and treatments including assistance at child births, health checks and immunisations. Where a practitioner becomes aware of a belief held by the parents, where it may impact on the health and development of the child, the practitioner should consult with other professionals to assess the potential risks of significant harm to the child.

## 2. Risks

The number of known cases of child abuse linked to accusations of 'possession' or 'witchcraft' is small, but children involved can suffer damage to their physical and mental health, their capacity to learn, their ability to form relationships and to their self-esteem. It is likely that a proportion of this type of abuse remains unreported.

Such abuse generally occurs when a carer views a child as being 'different', attributes this difference to the child being 'possessed' or involved in 'witchcraft' and attempts to exorcise him or her.

A child could be viewed as 'different' for a variety of reasons such as, disobedience; independence; bed-wetting; nightmares; illness; or disability. There is often a weak bond of attachment between the carer and the child.

There are various social reasons that make a child more vulnerable to an accusation of 'possession' or 'witchcraft'. These include family stress and/or a change in the family structure.

The attempt to 'exorcise' may involve severe beating, burning, starvation, cutting or stabbing and isolation, and usually occurs in the household where the child lives.

Any siblings or other children in the household may be well cared for with all their needs met by the parents and carers. The other children may have been drawn in by the adults to view the child as 'different' and may have been encouraged to participate in the adult activities.

## 3. Indicators

Concerns reported in the cases known from research have involved children aged 2 to 14, both boys and girls, and have generally been reported through schools or non-governmental organisations. The referrals usually take place at a point when the situation has escalated and become visible outside the family.

Note: This means that the child may have been subjected to serious harm for a period of time already.

The initial concerns referred have been about:

- Issues of neglect such as not being fed properly or being 'fasted', not being clothed, washed properly etc. but left to fend for themselves especially compared to the other children in the household;
- Often the carer is not the natural parent and the family structure can be complex;
- Children often appear distressed and withdrawn;
- The child is seen as the scapegoat for a change in family circumstances for the worse;
- In a group of children it may be the child who is relatively powerless vis-a-vis the parents/carers, maybe a child with no essential role in the family;

- The child is seen as someone who violates the family norms by being physically different perhaps because of illness, disability or, in some cases, a suspicion by the father of adultery by the mother.

Child abuse linked to faith or belief may occur where a child is treated as a scapegoat for perceived failure.

All agencies should be alert to the indicators above and should be able to identify children at risk of this type of abuse and intervene to prevent it.

The signs of abuse linked to faith or belief are like other forms of child abuse. However, children abused for the purpose of removal of demons or possessions often display 'particular and significant' signs of abuse either physically, in their presentation or their behaviours:

- Clothing - it is believed by some that a demon is represented by fire and in order to extinguish the demon the child must be cooled down as much as possible. Children can be found in minimal clothing for this reason;
- Scars - injuries relating to CALFB often have significant scars such as cuts. These are often done on the torso or back of the child out of sight. One such process of 'bloodletting' or Hijamas is done through the head or back of the child and often not very visible;
- Restraint Markings - Children undergoing this form of abuse often will not be willingly engaging and may be offered numbing creams or lotions. As such they are tied down or held and may have marks around the neck, wrists and ankles;
- Water / Magical Drinks - drinks are one of the most commonly occurring ways parents choose to 'help' their child, however the contents of the drinks, often a small bottle of water, are not checked. As such what parents are thinking is water can be anything. In some cases this has included saltwater mixture, cannabis, GHB and other class A drugs, infused with the water to make the child appear compliant;
- Ruqyah - this is a prayer read out from the Qur'an. The prayer itself does not refer to demons, witches etc. but the person reading this aloud in front of the child is said to then be able to tell if the child is possessed or not. A child may have explicit knowledge of, or make reference to this prayer.

#### **4. Protection and Action to be Taken**

Where the concerns about abuse linked to witchcraft and spirit possession for the welfare and safety of the child or young person are such that a referral to Children's Social Care should be made and the [Report a concern about a child process](#) must be followed. The same applies where the concerns relate to beliefs about the use of medical interventions or health treatment.

An assessment should aim to fully understand the background and context to the beliefs in order to establish the facts i.e. what is happening to the child. Independent advisors should be considered to act as advisors where possible.

The assessment may include key people in the community especially when working with new immigrant communities and different faith groups.

Practitioners need to establish if there is a faith community and leader which the family and the child adhere to and find out:

- The details of the faith leader and faith community which the family and child adhere to;
- The exact address of the premises where worship or meetings take place;
- Further information about the beliefs of the adherents and whether they are aligned to a larger organisation in the UK or abroad (websites are particularly revealing in terms of statements of faith and organisational structures).

In view of the nature of the risks, a full health assessment of the child should take place to establish the overall health of the child, the medical history and current circumstances.

## 5. Issues

Whilst specific beliefs, practices, terms or forms of abuse may exist, the underlying reasons for the abuse are often similar to other contexts in which children become at risk. These reasons can include family stress, deprivation, domestic violence and abuse, substance abuse and mental health problems. Children who are different in some way, perhaps because they have a disability or learning difficulty, an illness or are exceptionally bright, can also be targeted in this kind of abuse.

Any suggestions that the parent or carers will take the child out of the country must be taken seriously and legal advice sought regarding possible prevention. The child must be seen and spoken to on his or her own. The child's sleeping and living arrangements must be inspected.

In assessing the risks to the child, the siblings or any other children in the household must also be considered as they may have witnessed or been forced to participate in abusive or frightening activities.

Concerns about a place of worship may emerge where:

- A lack of priority is given to the protection of children and there is reluctance by some leaders to get to grips with the challenges of implementing sound safeguarding policies or practices;
- Assumptions exist that 'people in our community' would not abuse children or that a display of repentance for an act of abuse is seen to mean that an adult no longer poses a risk of harm;
- There is a denial or minimisation of the rights of the child or the demonisation of individuals;
- There is a promotion of mistrust of secular authorities and agencies;
- There are specific unacceptable practices that amount to abuse.

## 6. Further Information

### Good Practice Guidance

[National Action Plan to Tackle Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief \(2012\)](#) - information for those who work with children on a plan to help prevent child abuse arising from religion or superstition.

### Useful Websites

[Child abuse linked to faith or belief – Met Police](#)

[What is Child Abuse linked to Faith or Belief?](#) - National FGM Centre

[Safeguarding in faith communities](#) – NPSCC

[Child protection in religious organisations and settings](#) - Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse