

# **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 the police's experience, 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 following main categories.

### **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.

### **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. Below are some of the most common ones.

#### **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 – being able to recognise the signs means that you can help by responding, recording and referring**

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

- physical injuries, such as bruises or burns (including historical injuries/scaring)
- 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 UK laws 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 Metropolitan Police Service response to these challenges. They 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. Contact can be made with the team to provide advice, support and guidance for referrals and investigations.

### **Useful links**

**AFRUCA: Africans Unite Against Child Abuse.** A UK charity advocating the rights and welfare of African children <https://afruca.org/>

**Barnardo's National FGM Centre** provides a comprehensive overview of Child Abuse Linked to Faith and Belief (CALFB). It covers what CALFB is, health implications, justifications for it, the law and signs that a child could be at risk <http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/calfb/>

**Child Trafficking Advice Centre (CTAC)** provides advice for professionals responsible for safeguarding children from trafficking <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/child-trafficking/>

**Thirtyone:eight.** An independent Christian charity which helps individuals, organisations, charities, faith and community groups to protect vulnerable people from abuse <https://thirtyoneeight.org/>

**VCF: The Victoria Climbié Foundation.** An organisation campaigning to improve child protection policies and practices <https://vcf-uk.org/>

**The Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network's** work enables greater understanding and awareness of these complex issues so that solutions can be developed to prevent further violations of human rights from taking place <http://www.whrin.org/>

### **Useful publications**

**National Schools Safeguarding Guidance** – guidance for Schools and Colleges: Safeguarding Children from Sexual Violence, CSE and Harmful Practices has a chapter on CALFB

[http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Guidance-for-Schools\\_A4\\_Digital.pdf](http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Guidance-for-Schools_A4_Digital.pdf)

**Schools Charter on Ending Harmful Practices** encourages the delivery of high quality, safeguarding focused inputs on harmful practices [http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Schools-Charter\\_A4\\_Digital.pdf](http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Schools-Charter_A4_Digital.pdf)

**UK Government – National Action Plan** to Tackle Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-action-plan-to-tackle-child-abuse-linked-to-faith-or-belief>

## The Amber Project



The Amber Project is a pilot partnership with the London Borough of Redbridge Out of Schools Settings Team, the Metropolitan Police Service (Honour, Belief and Sex (crime and vulnerability) Partnership Team) and Dr Lisa Oakley, National Working Group on Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief (NWG CALFB). The Amber Project is an extension of existing safeguarding work and is focused on enhancing the response to child abuse linked to faith and belief.

### **Expectations**

Together with pilot partners, to deliver a new model transferrable nationally to other boroughs and organisations, helping to promote best practice throughout the sector and beyond. To provide information and indicators ensuring that others can more easily recognise signs of abuse and offer long-term support to children, young people and their families, and by doing so, help to prevent the escalating rise of abuse linked to faith and belief.

### **Reporting:**

- **NSPCC:** Call 800 5000 or email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)
- <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/reporting-abuse/report/>
- **Crime Stoppers:** (Anonymously) on: 0800 555 111
- <https://crimestoppers-uk.org/give-information/forms/pre-form>

# Training and development opportunity:

The Amber Project is running a FREE webinar on child abuse linked to faith and belief on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2021 between 10.30am and 1pm. To register, using the following link

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-amber-project-a-discussion-on-child-abuse-linked-to-faith-or-belief-tickets-155655286151?aff=erelexpmlt>

The webinar will include an overview, identification of vulnerability and cases of abuse, actions you can take, referrals – how to make and manage these effectively – and then Q&A from facilitators.

## Speaker profile:

**Inspector Allen Davis** is the MPS operational lead for Harmful Practices (FGM, Forced Marriage, HBA and Abuse Linked to Faith and Belief) and works at a National and International level on these issues. He leads on Chemsex and Sex Work and has an extensive background working with Schools and Education. He established the Charity 'Growing Against Violence' which seeks to prevent youth violence and protect young people against exploitation by gangs and grooming both on the streets and online. He is also Deputy Chair of the National Working Group of Child Abuse Linked to Faith and Belief.

**Dr Lisa Oakley** is an associate professor in psychology at the University of Chester and the chair of the National working group for child abuse linked to faith and belief. She is also chair of the task and finish group at the Church of England on spiritual abuse. She was part of a team who researched frontline practitioner and community awareness of child abuse linked to faith and belief. She has spoken nationally and internationally on this topic.

**Detective Sergeant Kate Bridger** has worked within child abuse and child protection since 2001, managing and investigating serious crimes committed against children. After 4 years investigating high profile child murders, she managed a joint Met Police and Border Force team covering London' sports, tackling international child trafficking, slavery and safeguarding. Kate is a specialist interviewer of children and Tier 5 interview advisor, a Met Police cultural advisor in relation to Southern Africa practices and traditions, fluent in Nyanja and Chichewa and a qualified safari guide.

## **Additional resources**

Independent news item highlighting concerns around increased risk during covid-19 pandemic  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-witchcraft-exorcisms-children-possession-police-london-faith-a9494211.html>

Informative 6 minute animated sketch about child abuse linked to faith or abuse which helps to identify CALFB and could be used to prompt further discussion in meetings. Further sketch being developed aimed at faith communities <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-wXaW1IPng>

BBC news item – FGM accused 'had spells and curses in the freezer'. FGM often linked to other forms of abuse including child abuse linked to faith or belief. Beliefs sit behind behaviour, complex links between harmful practices <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-46889181>