

# Child Abuse linked to Faith or Belief

## Contents

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1. **Definition and Concerns**
2. **Risks**
3. **Indicators**
4. **Protection and Action to be Taken**
5. **Issues**
6. **Further Information**

### 1. Definition and Concerns

Churches and faith-based groups play an important role in the lives of many children and adults. People who contribute to the life of faith-based communities and places of worship have a role to play in keeping people safe. They are also responsible for responding effectively and compassionately when someone comes forward to share concerns or disclose abuse.

High profile inquiries have shown the immense and long-lasting damage caused when abuse is perpetrated by someone in a faith-related role and therefore it is important to ensure safeguarding measures are in place to respond whenever concerns arise.

This policy is intended to help raise awareness of abuse linked to faith or belief and to encourage practical steps to be taken to prevent it.

The policy is not about challenging people's beliefs, it aims to guide practitioners in situations when individual's faith and belief's lead to abuse, which must not be tolerated.

Some churches and faith groups believe in the power of prayers and faith in God and their beliefs may impact upon how they use health services, specifically treatment and immunisations for children. As a result, some may refuse medical interventions and treatments including assistance at child births and health checks.

When 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 make every effort to understand the belief systems within families, particularly where there are cultural differences and should consult with other professionals to assess the potential risks of significant harm to the child.

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The term 'abuse' linked to faith or belief includes beliefs such as witchcraft spirit possession, demons or the devil, the evil eye or djinnis, dakini, kindoki ritual or multi killings. This also includes the use of fear of the supernatural to make children comply with, for example, being trafficked for domestic slavery or sexual exploitation. Genuine beliefs can be held by children and families, carers and religious leaders that evil forces have entered the child and are controlling him or her. Abuse may occur when an attempt is made to exorcise the child.

The beliefs are not confined to one faith, nationality or ethnic community.

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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.

## **2. Risks**

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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. However, the children involved can

suffer damage to their physical and mental health, their capacity to learn, their ability to form relationships and their self- esteem.

Abuse can happen anywhere, but it most commonly occurs within the child's home, although it can happen at a place of worship. 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', and 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 attachment difficulties 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.

A range of factors can contribute to the abuse of a child for reasons of faith or belief. Some of the common ones are:

- Belief in evil spirits: evil spirits that can possess children is often accompanied by a belief that a possessed child can 'infect' others. This could be through contact with shared food, or by simply being in their presence
  - Scapegoating: a child could be singled out as a cause of misfortune within the house, such as financial difficulties, divorce, infidelity, illness or death.
  - Bad Behaviour: Sometimes challenging behaviour may be attributed to spiritual forces. For example, a child being disobedient, rebellious, or having nightmares.
  - Physical Differences: A child could be singled out for having a physical difference such as a physical disability, learning disability, mental health issues, epilepsy, autism, stammers and deafness.
  - Being Gifted, Uncommon Characteristics: If a child has a particular talent, this can be something rationalised as the result of spirit possession or witchcraft.
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### 3. Indicators

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When working to identify such child abuse it is important to remember every child is different. Some children may display a combination of indicators of abuse whilst others will attempt to conceal them. In addition to the factors above, there are a range of common features across identified cases. These indicators of abuse which may also be common features in other kinds of abuse include:

- A child's body showing signs or marks, such as burns from physical abuse;
- A child's personal care deteriorating such as loss of weight, being hungry, turning up to school without food or lunch money. Being unkempt with dirty clothes or faeces smeared on them;
- It may be directly evident that the child's parent or carer does not show concern or have a close bond with the child;
- A child's attendance at school becoming irregular or the child being taken out of school altogether without another school place having been organised, or a deterioration in the child's performance at school;
- A child reporting that they are or have been accused of being evil, or that they are having the devil beaten out of them.
- A range of factors can contribute to the abuse of a child for reasons of faith or belief. Here is another consideration.
- 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+.

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

- 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
- Wearing unusual jewellery/items or in possession of strange ornaments/scripts.

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

Concerns reported in the cases known from research within the UK 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', and 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.
- 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.
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#### **4. Protection and Action to be Taken**

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Abuse linked to faith and belief can be difficult for practitioner to initially identify and more particularly a belief in spirit possession can be hard for professionals to accept. It may be difficult to make sense of what they are actually dealing with; it can often take several visits before such abuse is recognised. In cases of suspected abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession it may be particularly useful to consider the following:

- What are the beliefs of the family;
- What is the family structure;
- Are there reasons why the child is being scapegoated within the family;
- What is the preferred language of the family;

- Is there a need for an interpreter.

Practitioners should seek advice if they are dealing with a culture or set of beliefs that they do not understand, or that appear unfamiliar to the practitioner. It is important that practitioners make every effort to understand the religious beliefs and cultural practices within the family. It is important to gain trust with the family you work with which will assist with resolving the issues that were initially raised as a concern.

Where there are concerns about the welfare and safety of a child that are linked to potential abuse and where witchcraft and spirit possession is suspected then a referral to the Initial Response Team, Children and Families Division should be made according to the [Referrals Procedure](#) .

The same applies where the concerns relate to beliefs about the use of medical interventions or health treatment. In such cases legal advice may need to be sought if a child is likely to suffer significant harm, for example a parent refuses to allow a child to have a blood transfusion and the child is at risk of dying as a result of this.

The NARRATES assessment should aim to fully understand the background and context to the beliefs in order to establish the facts, for example, what is happening to the child.

An interpreter may be required in instances where English is not the family's first language.

The assessment may need to include key people in the community especially when working with minority communities and different faith groups.

Practitioners need to know if there is a faith community and leader that the family are linked to. It is important to establish:

- The details of the faith leader and faith community;
- 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 an organisation on the Isle of Man or off island within 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.

Consideration should be given to asking an independent person to act as an advisor and mediator.

## 5. Issues

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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 off the island 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.

One of the most significant challenges is raising awareness so that practitioners across all agencies are skilled to be able to recognise child abuse linked to faith or belief and know how to respond. More importantly is the need to encourage victims and witnesses to come forward.

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## 6. Further Information

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Further contact for advice can be found from the local representative for some faiths, from the Safeguarding Advisor and Coordinator for Churches Alive in Man (CAIM)

The African Caribbean Evangelical Alliance (ACEA); Churches Together in England and the Muslim Parliament can be contacted for advice, all of whom are consulting about and developing guidance.

**Further contacts for advice can be found from representatives for some faiths such as:**

**An Exploration of knowledge about Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief (2016)**

**National UK Action Plan to Tackle Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief (2012)**

**Safeguarding Children from Abuse Linked to a Belief in Spirit Possession (2007)** this good practice guidance is archived but still available.

**VCF: The Victoria Climbié Foundation** – An organisation campaigning to improve child protection policies and practices.

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