

SPIRITUAL, CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

CONTENTS

1. Definition and Concerns
2. Risks
3. Indicators
4. Protection and Action to be taken
5. Issues
6. Further information
7. Law

1. DEFINITION AND CONCERNS

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.

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.

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. Other children who may have witnessed abuse to others may also be subject to Significant Harm.

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 Spiritual, Cultural and Religious Beliefs 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.

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 Referrals Procedure must be followed. The same applies where the concerns relate to beliefs about the use of medical interventions or health treatment.

The parent/s may have a perspective on child rearing practices underpinned by culture or faith which are not in line with UK law and cultural norms, and they may put their child at risk of harm through actions such as exercising harsh physical punishment, forcing a child into marriage etc.

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 and mediators 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.
- There are specific unacceptable practices that amount to abuse.

The basic requirement that children are kept safe is universal and cuts across cultural boundaries. Every child living in this country is entitled to be given the protection of the law, regardless of his or her background. Cultural heritage is important to many people, but it cannot take precedence over standards of childcare embodied in law. Every organisation concerned with the welfare and protection of children should have mechanisms in place to ensure equal access to services of the same quality, and that each child, irrespective of colour or background, should be treated as an individual requiring appropriate care.

There can be no excuse or justification for failing to take adequate steps to protect a vulnerable child, simply because that child's cultural background would make the necessary action somehow inappropriate.

A child is a child regardless of his or her colour and he or she must be kept safe. Cultural issues must be considered but the objective is the safety of the child.

Safeguarding outweighs religious/cultural needs.

6. FURTHER INFORMATION

Further contacts for advice can be found from the local representatives for some faiths, from organisations such as: the Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS) who provide information about exorcism; the African

Caribbean Evangelical Alliance (ACEA); Churches Together in England, and the Muslim Parliament: all of whom are consulting about and developing guidance.

National Action Plan to Tackle Child Spiritual, Cultural and Religious Beliefs (2012)

Final Report of the pan-London Safeguarding Children Culture and Faith Project

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

7. LAW

CHILDREN ACT 1989

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.

CHILDREN ACT 2004

Under Section 11 of the Children Act 2004, government bodies and agencies must 'make arrangements for ensuring that their functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.' This applies to children's services, Health bodies and Trusts and police authorities (including transport police).