

## PROCEDURES AND GUIDANCE

### Spirit Possession or Witchcraft

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## **SPIRIT POSSESSION OR WITCHCRAFT**

Spirit possession or witchcraft is where the parents, families and the child themselves believe that an evil force has entered a child and is controlling them, the belief includes the child being able to use the evil force to harm others. This evil is variously known as 'black magic', 'kindoki', 'ndoki', 'the evil eye', 'djinns', 'voodoo', 'obeah', and children are called 'witches' or 'sorcerers'.

Parents can be initiated into and/or supported in the belief that their child is possessed by an evil spirit by a privately contacted spiritualist/indigenous healer or by a local community faith healer. The task of exorcism or deliverance is often undertaken by a faith healer, or by the parents or other family members.

A child may suffer emotional abuse if they are labelled and treated as being possessed with an evil spirit. In addition, significant harm to a child may occur when an attempt is made to 'exorcise' or 'deliver' the evil spirits from the child.

Significant harm is defined as a situation where a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, a degree of physical, sexual and/or emotional harm (through abuse or neglect) which is so harmful that there needs to be compulsory intervention by child protection agencies into the life of the child and their family.

The forms the abuse can take include:

- Physical abuse: 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: in the form of isolation (e.g. not allowing a child to eat or share a room with family members or threatening to abandon them). The child may also be persuaded that they are possessed;
- Neglect: failure to ensure appropriate medical care, supervision, school attendance, good hygiene, nourishment, clothing or warmth;
- Sexual abuse: within the family or community, children abused in this way may be particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

## **REASONS FOR THE ABUSE**

A belief in spirit possession is not confined to particular countries, cultures, religions or communities. Common factors that put a child at risk of harm include:

Belief in evil spirits:

This is commonly accompanied by a belief that the child could 'infect' others with such 'evil'. The explanation for how a child becomes possessed varies widely, but includes through food that they have been given or through spirits that have flown around them;

Scapegoating because of a difference:

It may be that the child is being looked after by adults who are not their parents (i.e. privately fostered), and who do not have the same affection for the child as their own children. A child can also be viewed as being different because of disobedience, rebelliousness, over-independence, bedwetting, nightmares, illness or because they have a perceived or physical abnormality or a disability. Disabilities involved in documented cases included learning disabilities, mental ill health, epilepsy, autism, a stammer and deafness;

Changes and/or complexity in family structure or dynamics:

There is research evidence (see *Stobart, Child Abuse Linked to Accusations of Spirit Possession* - DfE 2006 <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6416/1/RR750.pdf> ) that children become more vulnerable to accusations of spirit possession following a change in family structure (e.g. a parent or carer having a new partner or transient or several partners). The family

structure also tends to be complex so that exact relationships to the child were not immediately apparent. This may mean the child is living with extended family or in a private fostering arrangement. In some cases, this may even take on a form of servitude;

Change of family circumstances for the worse:

A spiritual explanation is sought in order to rationalise misfortune and the child is identified as the source of the problem because they have become possessed by evil spirits. Research evidence is that the family's disillusionment very often had its roots in negative experiences of migration:

- in the vast majority of identified cases in the UK to date, the families were first or second generation migrants suffering from isolation from extended family, a sense of not belonging or feeling threatened or misunderstood. These families can also have significantly unfulfilled expectations of quality of life in the UK;

Parental difficulties:

A parent's mental ill health appears to be attributed to a child being possessed in a significant minority of cases. Illnesses typically involved include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and schizophrenia.

## **RECOGNISING CHILD ABUSE OR NEGLECT LINKED TO SPIRIT POSSESSION**

Indicators of abuse include:

- A child's body showing signs or marks, such as bruises or burns, from physical abuse;
- A child becoming noticeably confused, withdrawn, disorientated or isolated and appearing alone amongst other children;
- A child's personal care deteriorating, for example through a loss of weight, being hungry, turning up to school without food or food money or being unkempt with dirty clothes and even faeces smeared on to them;
- It may also be directly evident that the child's parent does not show concern for or a close bond with them;
- A child's attendance at school becoming irregular, or being taken out of school all together without another school place having been organised;
- 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.

Professionals who are best placed to recognise when a child has been labelled as spirit possessed are those who have regular contact with children - teachers and school nurses, health professionals, community groups and churches, and in some instances Local Authority Children's Social Care professionals. Professionals working with parents may also become aware that a parent has come to believe that an evil spirit has entered their child.

## **PROFESSIONAL RESPONSE**

Faith based abuse may challenge a professional's own faith and/or belief, or the professional may have little or no knowledge on the issues that may arise. This makes it difficult for the professional to identify what they might be dealing with and affect their judgement. It will often take a number of contacts with the child or pieces of information to recognise the abuse.

Professionals should consider:

- How to build a relationship of trust with the child, and whether there is another professional who already has a trusting relationship with the child;
- Whether to involve the family. A belief that the child is possessed may mean they are stigmatised in their family. If the child has been labelled as possessed, professionals should find out how this affects the child's relationship with others in the extended family and community;
- What the beliefs of the family are;

- Where to obtain expert advice about cultures or beliefs that are not their own;
- What pressures the family are under. These cases of abuse will sometimes relate to blaming the child for something that has gone wrong in the family. Professionals should consider whether there is anything that can or should be done to address relevant pressures on the family;
- That the abuser may have a deeply held belief that they are delivering the child of evil spirits and that they are not harming the child but actually helping them. Holding such a belief is no defence or mitigation should a child be abused.

Professionals should consider:

- Whether these beliefs are supported by others in the family or in the community, and whether this is an isolated case or if other children from the same community are being treated in a similar manner.
- Whether there is a faith community and leader which the family and the child adhere to:
  - As a minimum, the full details of the faith leader and faith community to which the family and child adhere to should be obtained;
  - The exact address of the premises where worship or meetings take place should be obtained;
  - Further information should be obtained about the belief 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).
- The family structure:
  - The roles of the adults in the household should be clarified (e.g. who the child's main carer is, whether the child is being privately fostered);
  - Whether the abuse relates to the arrival of a new adult into the household or the arrival of the child, perhaps from abroad;
  - If the child has recently arrived, what their care structure in their country of origin was. What the child's immigration status is;
  - The identities and relationships of all members of the household. These should be confirmed with documentation; it may be appropriate to consider DNA testing;
- Whether there are reasons for the child to be scapegoated (e.g. the child's behaviour or physical appearance may be different from other children in the family or community, the child may be disabled or their parents labelled as possessed);
- Whether an interpreter is required. If working with a small community, the professional should assure themselves that the interpreter and the family are not part of the same social network.

Professionals should ensure that all agencies in the child's network understand the situation so that they are in a position to support the child appropriately. The child can themselves come to hold the belief that they are possessed and this can significantly complicate their rehabilitation.

Current guidelines for praying with children are available in the 'Safe and Secure' booklet at [www.ccpas.co.uk](http://www.ccpas.co.uk) produced by the Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS) and the Metropolitan Police. Whilst this booklet is specifically for Christian communities, the principles it sets out for safeguarding children are the same across all faith communities and can be adapted accordingly. <http://files.ccpas.co.uk/documents/StayingSafeAndSecure.pdf>

To dismiss the belief may be harmful to the child involved. With careful and appropriate engagement and adequate support, harm can be reduced or in some cases totally removed.

## **WORKING WITH PLACES OF WORSHIP AND FAITH ORGANISATIONS**

In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to work in partnership with a responsible leader/s from a faith community or to assist a community in terms of safeguarding children through education and training. Such training provides preventative and parenting opportunities.

Before embarking on this course of action, a risk assessment should be conducted to ensure that the child/ren, professionals and others involved in the engagement can do so safely. This strategy is best conducted utilising agencies such as the Police and trusted community partners. There are charities and statutory bodies who can access faith communities to assist in this training.

Concerns about a place of worship may emerge where:

- A lack of priority is given to the protection of children and there is a reluctance of some leaders to get to grips with the challenges of implementing sound safeguarding policies and 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.

Professionals should consult with their agency's nominated Child Protection Officer and make a referral to Local Authorities Children's Social Care, in line with procedures outlined in Vol.1 and Vol.2 of these guidelines and procedures.

## **CHILDREN BEING TAKEN OUT OF THE UK**

If a professional is concerned that a child who is being abused or neglected is being taken out of the country, it is relevant to consider:

- Why the child is being taken out of the UK;
- Whether the care arrangements for the child in the UK allow the Local Authority to discharge its safeguarding duties;
- What the child's immigration status is. Professionals should also consider whether the child recently arrived in the UK, and how they arrived;
- What the proposed arrangements are for the child in their country of destination, and whether it is possible to check these arrangements;
- Whether the arrangements appear likely to safeguard and promote the child's welfare;
- That taking the child outside of the UK for exorcism or deliverance type procedures is likely to cause significant harm. (in addition see 5.8 above).

**For further guidance see:**

**Child abuse linked to faith or belief: national action plan 14 August 2012 DfE:**

**[HTTPS://WWW.GOV.UK/GOVERNMENT/UPLOADS/SYSTEM/UPLOADS/ATTACHMENT\\_DATA/FILE/175437/ACTION PLAN - ABUSE LINKED TO FAITH OR BELIEF.PDF](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175437/action_plan_-_abuse_linked_to_faith_or_belief.pdf)**