

Safeguarding Signs: Witchcraft and Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief

What Is Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief?

It includes concepts of:

- witchcraft and spirit possession
- demons or the devil acting through children (traditionally seen in some Christian beliefs)
- the evil eye, djinns (traditionally known in Islamic faith contexts) or dakini (in the Hindu context)
- rituals where child murder is believed to bring supernatural benefits or medicinal remedies
- use of magic/witchcraft to create fear and compliance, especially with child sexual exploitation
- children treated as a scapegoat for perceived failure, e.g. bringing misfortune or bad spirits into the home

Challenges

- Language barriers
- Misunderstanding around scale/prevalence of abuse
- Wider community influences beyond the immediate family
- Voice of the child or young person not always acknowledged
- Parental lack of safeguarding knowledge
- Abuse not taken seriously by practitioners as concepts (e.g. spirits) are seen to be 'made up'

Signs and Indicators

- Physical indicators, e.g. bruising, burns, cuts, sore eyes or genitals where chilli peppers have been rubbed onto them
- Signs of neglect, e.g. lack of medical care, nourishment, supervision, good hygiene
- Child talk about being 'evil' or 'having the devil beaten out of them', or using certain terms, such as djinn, kindoki, ndoki, black magic, Obeah, juju or voodoo
- Emotional harm, e.g. fear of being abandoned, being kept in isolation from the family
- Child is stigmatised, e.g. a child being labelled as a witch or told they are possessed
- Behaviour changes, e.g. becoming more withdrawn, confused or isolated
- A deteriorating appearance or wearing special items to 'protect them'
- Changes to school attendance

What Can I Do?

- Understand the families you work with and build strong relationships with parents, carers and the wider community.
- If you have concerns about a child, dismiss any personal worries about upsetting a family or disrespecting a certain culture. Instead, ask yourself: "Is this harming the child or likely to cause harm to them?"
- Follow your setting's standard safeguarding procedures and report to your DSL.

Risk Factors

Child abuse linked to faith or belief is not limited to one faith, nationality or ethnic community, but there can be increased risk if:

- there is belief about witchcraft or similar in the local community and/or an influential person who promotes abuse as a solution;
- children are perceived to be 'different' by the family, e.g. children with SEND or who are gifted and talented/higher attaining;
- children have ongoing ill health or were born following a difficult pregnancy;
- children live with extended family, carers or, in particular, are in private foster placements

Children who are exposed to abuse linked to faith and belief are also more vulnerable to sexual abuse or sexually abusive practices, such as during an exorcism or deliverance.

Find out more:



DfE Guidance



Met Police Guidance



Victoria Climbié Foundation