

Child Abuse Linked with a Belief Factsheet

The term 'belief in spirit possession' is defined for the purposes of this protocol as **the belief that an evil force has entered a child and is controlling him or her**. Sometimes the term 'witch' is used and is defined here **as the belief that a child is able to use an evil force to harm others**. There is also a range of other terms connected to such abuse. These include:

Black magic, Kindoki, Ndoki, the Evil Eye, Djinns (the term 'genie' is a modern derivative of this), Voodoo, Obeah, Demons. Children may also be called **witches** or **child sorcerers**.

Genuine beliefs may 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 perceived evil that they believe is threatening them and abuse often occurs when an attempt is made to 'exorcise' or 'deliver' the child. Exorcism is defined here as attempting to expel evil spirits from a child. The abuse may be carried out by the child's parents or carers or others in the family network, as well as by faith leaders. The child can themselves come to hold the belief that they are possessed and this may be harmful in itself and can significantly complicate their rehabilitation.

Forms of Abuse

The abuse usually occurs in the household where the child lives but it may also occur in a place of worship where alleged 'diagnosis' and 'exorcism' may take place. The most common forms abuse include:

Physical Abuse: beating, shaking, burning, cutting, stabbing, semi-strangulating, tying up, rubbing chilli peppers or other substances into genitals/eyes or in mouth.

Emotional/Psychological Abuse: enforced isolation, threats of abandonment, convincing the child that they are evil or possessed.

Neglect: failure to ensure or provide appropriate medical care, supervision, regular school attendance, hygiene, nourishment, clothing or warmth.

Sexual Abuse: children may be particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, may feel powerless/worthless, that they won't be believed.

Why Children are Abused or Neglected in this Way

There are no stereotypes. This kind of abuse is not confined to particular countries / cultures / religions / communities.

Some people convince them selves that their bad luck or misfortune is linked to spiritual forces - that a child is the source of the problem because they have become possessed by evil spirits.

Children can become a scapegoat because of an obvious or perceived difference. It can stem from a combination of factors including - a weak bond of affection between a child and parent / carer, a belief that the child is violating family norms, a perception that the child is 'different'. It may be that the child is being looked after by adults who are not the parent, and who do not have the same affection for the child as their own children. A child can also be viewed as being different due to disobedience, rebelliousness, over-independence, bedwetting, nightmares, illness, perceived or physical abnormality, mental health, epilepsy, autism, a stammer and deafness. Many of the children in our studies were also described by their families or carers as being naughty. In other cases there were no obvious reasons, but a perceived issue.

Social Factors

- Changing in family structure or dynamics;
- A family's disillusionment with life or negative experience of migration;
- A parent's or carer's mental health.

Identifying Child Abuse or Neglect Linked to a Belief in Spirit Possession

In working to identify such child abuse it is important to remember every child is different. Some children will display a combination of indicators of abuse whilst others will attempt to conceal them. In addition to the social factors above, there is 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 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 lunch money, or being unkempt with dirty clothes and even faeces smeared on to them;
- It may be directly evident that the child's parent or carer does not show concern for 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 a child's performance at school;
- 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'.

Understanding the particular risk of harm to the child, 'Working Together' and local procedures set out how to assess the needs of a child, including the risk of harm. Abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession can be hard for professionals to accept, difficult to understand and it can often take a number of visits to recognise such abuse. In cases of suspected abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession, it may be particularly useful to consider the following:

- Building a relationship of trust with the child.
- The beliefs of the family.
- Seek advice.
- The family structure
- Reasons the child may be picked on.
- Professional Interpreters

Relevant Services in Cases of Abuse

Abuse of a child linked to a belief in possession can take the form of physical, emotional or sexual abuse and neglect. In some cases the abuse can be severe and can even lead to death. There may be a substantial psychological impact on the child, particularly if they are ostracised by the family or community or if they themselves believe they are possessed. The services that a child needs will depend on their individual circumstances, but services that may be particularly relevant to such abuse include: children's social care, Child and Adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), faith groups, the police, schools and wider family support services.