Safeguarding Children from Abuse Linked to a Belief in Spirit Possession
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1. Introduction

The belief in “possession” or witchcraft is widespread and not confined to particular communities, cultures or religions. The commonly accepted definition across faith based organisations, non governmental organisations and the public sector is the term “possession by evil spirits” or “witchcraft”. Any concerns which arise about a child in this context must be taken seriously.

Current guidelines for praying for children and engaging with them in a faith context are available in the 'Safe and Secure' booklet', produced by the Churches’ Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS) and the Metropolitan Police. Whilst the 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

2. Key Considerations

The key considerations in Safeguarding Children from Abuse Linked to a Belief in Spirit Possession are:

i. **Child abuse is never acceptable in any community, in any culture, in any religion, under any circumstances.** This includes abuse that might arise through a belief in spirit possession or other spiritual or religious beliefs.

ii. **Everyone working or in contact with children has a responsibility to recognise and know how to act on evidence, concerns and signs** that a child's health, development and safety is or may be being impaired, especially when they suffer or are at risk of significant harm.

iii. **North Tyneside Safeguarding and Child Protection procedures apply and must always be followed in all cases where abuse or neglect is suspected including those that may be related to a belief in spirit possession.**

iv. **Child abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession sometimes stems from a child being used as a scapegoat.** 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 of poor outcomes due to factors such as family stress, deprivation, domestic violence, substance abuse and or mental health problems. In addition, children who are different in some way, perhaps because they have a disability, an illness, learning needs, or are exceptionally bright, might be targeted in this kind of abuse. In some cases, there will be no obvious difference and the child will have been targeted because they will have been perceived to be ‘spiritually’ different.
v. **The number of identified cases of such abuse is small** but where it occurs the impact on the child is great, causing much distress and the child will be suffering harm. It is possible that a significantly larger number of cases remain undetected.

vi. **Professionals with safeguarding responsibilities need to be able to identify links**, where they exist, between individual cases of such child abuse and individual faith leaders as well as wider belief, faith or community practices. Where connections are identified and appropriate action is taken, the risk that other children will be similarly abused can be greatly reduced. In some cases, links to a belief in possession may not come to light until some way into the investigation of abuse.

vii. **Local agencies should also work to minimise risk of harm**, by building trust and understanding of child abuse issues with local communities. Robust local partnerships advance early identification and safeguarding of children. Local agencies and institutions share responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people. They should act if they have concerns about a child’s welfare, and ensure that practices that lead to abuse that may be linked to a belief in spirit possession or any other belief, are challenged and stopped.

viii. **People working with children should always take advice whenever they feel it is required, in accordance with information sharing protocols and guidance.** The fact that a suspected case of abuse or neglect may be linked to spirit possession can initially seem daunting. It is important to use the experience of colleagues, including those in other services, to overcome misgivings and understand complexities. A child’s safety and welfare must always come first.

3. **Definitions**

The term ‘belief in spirit possession’ is defined for the purposes of this guidance as the belief that an evil force has entered a child and is controlling him or her. 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 defined here as attempting to expel evil spirits from a child.

Where 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. Children may also be 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 leader. The task of exorcism or deliverance is often undertaken by a faith leader, or by the parents or other family members.

A child may suffer emotional abuse if he or she is 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 spirit from the child.

4. Forms of abuse

The forms the abuse can take include:

- Physical abuse: in the forms of 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: in the form of 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.

5. 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;
- Rationalising misfortune by attributing it to spiritual forces and when a carer views a child 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 [DfES 2006]) 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 tended 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.

6. 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 may display a combination of indicators of abuse whilst others will attempt to conceal them. In addition to the 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’.
Practitioners who have concerns about a child’s welfare should discuss these concerns with their manager or a designated member of staff, or a named or designated health professional.

If the child is considered to be a child in need, the child should be referred to North Tyneside Children’s Social Care. This includes a child who is believed to be, or is already known to be, suffering significant harm.

7. Professional response

Any practitioner who comes in to contact with children should be able to recognise evidence that a child is being abused or neglected, and know what to do to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child. This may be the crucial intervention that protects the child from further abuse or neglect. The process that should be followed in all cases is set out in NTSCB Safeguarding and Child Protection Procedures.

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.

(a) How do I understand the particular risk of harm to the child?

Abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession can be hard for professionals to accept and it may be difficult to understand what they are likely to be dealing with. Faith based abuse may challenge a professional’s own faith and/or beliefs or the professional may have little or no knowledge of the issues that may arise. It can often take a number of contacts with the child or pieces of information to recognise the abuse. Professionals should consider:

- How do I build a relationship of trust with the child? Children and young people will usually stick to their account and not speak until they feel comfortable. It will be important to spend time with the child alone and build a relationship of trust, subject to consent of the family. It is important to ascertain the child's wishes and feelings and understand the environment in which the child lives.
- What are the beliefs of the family? Beliefs in spirits and possession are widespread. The key feature in cases of abuse is not the beliefs of a family, but that the perpetrator of abuse uses these beliefs as a justification for abuse of a child.
- You should seek advice if you are dealing with a culture or set of beliefs that you do not understand, or which are unfamiliar to you. Practitioners need to have an understanding of religious beliefs and cultural practices in order to help gain the trust of the family or community.
The NSPCC has produced a helpful resource on faith and religion, available at www.nspcc.org.uk/inform

- **What is the family structure?** In cases of abuse linked to a belief in possession, the relationship between the child and their carer may be unclear. These cases of abuse will sometimes relate to the arrival of a new adult into the household, or the arrival of the child, perhaps from abroad. What are the roles of the adults in the household? Who looks after the child? Is the child being privately fostered? If the child has recently arrived, what was their care structure in their country of origin? What is the immigration status of the child? The identities and relationships of all members of the household should be identified, including with documentation. It may be appropriate to consider DNA testing.

- **Are there reasons why the child might be picked on?** Are they different from other children in the family or community? Are they disabled? Have their parents been labelled as possessed?

- **Do I need a professional interpreter?** What is the preferred language of the child and family? There may be a need for neutral, high-quality, gender-appropriate translation or interpretation services. Children should never be expected to interpret on behalf of adults or other family members. If working with a very small community, what is the relationship between interpreter and the family? Are they part of the same social network?

(b) **How do I best safeguard and promote the welfare of the child?**

Professionals should ensure that all the 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.

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.

In cases of abuse linked to a belief in possession it may be particularly useful to consider the following additional issues:

- **What pressures are the family under?** These cases of abuse will sometimes relate to blaming the child for something that has gone wrong in the family. Is there anything you can do to address relevant pressures on the family?

- **Is the perpetrator of abuse isolated?** The perpetrator may believe that they are doing what they should to rid the child of evil spirits and might even believe that they are not harming the child. Are these beliefs supported by others in the family or in the community? Would it help to involve a senior faith leader?

- **Involving the family.** A belief that the child is possessed may mean they are stigmatised in their family. Do members of the family have the same views about the situation? If the child has been labelled as possessed, how does this affect their relationship with others in the extended family and community?
• Asking questions or seeking advice about a culture, religion, or set of beliefs you are not familiar with. The use of correct terminology will help to build up trust with the child and family.
• A multi-agency response. There will be a variety of different agencies in the community involved with children and their development. Practitioners should be aware of the services that are available locally to support the child and how to gain access to them.

(c) Which services are relevant in these 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 very severe and 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 that 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, including a placement away from home in foster care, residential care, or adoption, if appropriate.
• Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and it may be appropriate to engage adult mental health services to assess and where appropriate work with the perpetrator of abuse and child’s parents or carers.
• Health services, especially for victims of severe physical abuse.
• Faith groups, the family’s faith community may need advice from Children’s Social Care. They may be able to help a family understand how to treat their child and offer support to the child or family to help promote the welfare of the child. However, care should be taken to establish whether the faith group that the victim’s parents or carers are affiliated to supports the practice of abusive exorcism. Social workers may also want to seek advice from faith groups to aid their understanding of reasons behind any abuse.
• Wider family support services from the statutory and voluntary sector.
• The Police. Where a social worker believes that a criminal offence may have been committed, they or their manager should discuss the child with the police at the earliest opportunity, in line with NTSCB Safeguarding and Child Protection Procedures.
• Schools may identify concerns about children. Where a child of school age is the subject of a child protection plan the school should be involved in the preparation of the plan, and where appropriate in its implementation.

(d) Children being taken out of the UK

If a practitioner is concerned that a child who is being abused or neglected may be taken out of the country and as a result s/he may be at risk of significant harm, the practitioner should contact Children’s Social Care and the local police immediately. Children’s Social Care will consider whether it should use its powers under the Children Act 1989 to
safeguard the child. A practitioner seeking to protect such a child should consider the need for independent legal advice about immigration from an accredited lawyer. Consideration should be given to liaison with the Borders and Immigration Agency, not only about the child but also about the abusers and anyone seeking to smuggle a child out of the country. Specific guidance on trafficked children is available in the NTSCB procedure “Safeguarding Children Who May Have Been Trafficked”

It will be relevant to consider:

- Why is the child being taken out of the UK?
- Will the care arrangements for the child in the UK allow the local authority to discharge its safeguarding duties?
- What is the child’s immigration status? Has the child recently arrived in the UK, and how did they arrive?
- What are the proposed arrangements for the child in their country of destination? Is it possible to check these arrangements?
- Whether the arrangements appear likely to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child?
- That taking a child outside of the UK for exorcism or deliverance type procedures is likely to cause significant harm.

(e) Take advice

If anyone suspects that a child is, or may be, at risk of harm due and you are not sure what to do, consult a manager, designated or named health professional, designated member of staff, Children’s Social Care, or the police. Similarly, seek advice if you are dealing with a culture that you do not understand.

8. 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 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. Services should consider how best to tackle the concerns, whether intervention is needed to safeguard children and whether concerns can be addressed through influence and engagement.

Professionals should consult with their agency's designated safeguarding children lead and make a referral to Children's Social Care, in line with the Referral and Assessment Procedure.

9. **Related guidance**

*Safeguarding Children from Abuse Linked to a Belief in Spirit Possession, DFES, 2007.*


Faith, Religion and Safeguarding. Website: [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform)