

ABUSE LINKED TO FAITH OR BELIEF (SPIRITUAL ABUSE)

Background: Spiritual abuse is commonly a belief in concepts of: witchcraft & spirit possession, demons or the devil acting through children or adults or leading them astray (traditionally seen in some Christian beliefs); the evil eye or djinns (traditionally known in some Islamic faith contexts) and dakini (in the Hindu context); ritual or muti murders where the killing of children or adults is believed to bring supernatural benefits or the use of their body parts is believed to produce potent magical remedies; use of belief in magic or witchcraft to create fear in victims to make them more compliant when they are being trafficked for domestic slavery or sexual exploitation.

Why it matters: Spiritual abuse is a hidden crime that can affect children & adults. From 2019-2020, 2,080 UK cases against children were recorded. Cases have been recorded across communities & religions. Spiritual abuse is a safeguarding matter and can cover all forms for abuse or any other harmful practice linked to a belief or a faith. Abuse may happen anywhere but is most commonly within the victim's home. Satanic abuse includes abuse carried out in the name of 'Satan' and may have links to cults. Deliverance or exorcism is a practice designed to end spirit possession and can involve physical practices like cutting & burning.

Questions to consider: Spiritual abuse is misunderstood by professionals and considered 'taboo'. Do you know how to recognise the signs and indicators of spiritual abuse? Do you work with children or adults who might be at risk? Do you provide opportunities for children, adults at risk and their families to discuss issues of faith and belief? Do you talk to families/carers about their faith and belief?



Information: Spiritual abuse is a breach of human rights and the rights of children. Signs that someone could be at risk of spiritual abuse: children who are seen as 'naughty' or have challenging behaviour; children or adults with disabilities including autism, epilepsy, Down's Syndrome & dyslexia; albinos & left handed people; children whose parents have been branded as witches; children living away from home in private fostering situations or children or adults in domestic servitude; children living within complex family structures, eg polygamous or reconstituted families.

What to do: Do not delay - there is sometimes a rapid escalation of abuse which can result in considerable harm or death. If you are worried about a child or adult, follow your organisation's safeguarding procedures, ensuring you mention you are concerned the child/adult may be a victim of spiritual abuse. If someone is in immediate danger, call 999. The National FGM Centre has further information - [Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief – National FGM Centre](#) including an leaflet on [CALFB](#).

Examples of spiritual abuse: **Physical:** beating, burning, cutting, stabbing, strangling, poisoning, rubbing chilli peppers or oils on genitals or eyes. **Emotional:** isolation, blaming & scapegoating, humiliation, constant criticism, coercion, accusations of possession, threats of abandonment. **Neglect:** starvation, seclusion, inadequate clothing, poor hygiene & environmental sanitation, repeated illness, untreated injuries, irregular attendance at school. **Sexual:** made to perform/ subjected to sexual acts, sexual touching, coerced into sexual exploitation.

Indicators: Victim reports they are evil and/or having the devil beaten out of them; made to wear items (eg jewellery) they have been told will protect them from evil spirits; personal care deteriorates; bruises or burns; seen as the scapegoat for a worsening of family fortunes; children attending school irregularly or removed from school to be taken overseas for a deliverance or exorcism; being forced to engage in rituals to cleanse or deliver them from evil; family visibly disliking the victim or being treated differently from others.