



Exploring concerns around child abuse linked to faith or belief

Guidance for organisations working with children and families

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About this document

In this document we provide an overview of what child abuse linked to faith or belief is and provide useful advice and guidance to frontline professionals working with children and young people. The aim of this document is to enable frontline professionals to develop the skills needed to have conversations with children and parent(s)/carer(s) about faith and belief.

It is hoped that by developing the necessary skills and knowledge about this issue it will enable professionals to have informed conversations when there are concerns about child abuse linked to faith or belief.

Normalising conversations about faith and belief

It is good practice for organisations working with children and parent(s)/carer(s) to keep a record of their faith or belief. We recommend at minimum professionals should know if a family hold a faith or have a belief system that is important to them. This is a central part of a person's identity, so knowledge of this can improve your working relationship with children and parent(s)/carer(s).

The following are examples of questions that professionals can use to start the conversation, and staff should use their judgement regarding which questions are relevant and appropriate to ask. It is important to remember that people's faith or beliefs may change, therefore it is good practice to remember that asking these questions will not be a one off event.

Questions you could ask:

- What faith or belief do you/your family hold, if any?
- How do you practice your faith or belief?
- Which place of worship do you/your family attend and how often?
- What role, if any, do you/your family play within your faith or belief?
- What, if any, specific events are celebrated within your faith or belief? E.g. Christmas, Eid, Diwali, Hanukkah etc...
- When and how are they celebrated?
- How does your faith or belief help you during times of need/stress?
- Which faith leader, if any, would you turn to?
- How important is your faith or belief to you and your family?
- Is there any way we can support you/your family to practise your faith or belief?
- Is there anything else we should be aware of regarding your faith or belief?

These questions can be tailored and explored with children, especially around events such as Christmas, Eid, Diwali, Hanukkah etc.

Developing an awareness of a child's or parent's faith or belief system can help to identify how it can be a safety factor.

It can also shed light and act as a starting point to understanding the family's view of the world and how they make sense of misfortunes they may encounter. The next section focuses on child abuse linked to faith or belief which is an umbrella term used to describe certain kinds of abuse linked to faith or belief. These beliefs are not confined to one faith, nationality or community.

An overview of Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief

There are a variety of definitions associated with abuse linked to faith or belief. In 2012, the Department for Education published [The National Action Plan¹](#), a document which outlines what is meant by child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief (CALFB).

Definition

“Belief in concepts of:

- witchcraft and spirit possession, demons or the devil acting through children 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 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 children to make them more compliant when they are being trafficked for domestic slavery or sexual exploitation”

Parents/carers/relatives/community members and faith leaders (both in the UK and abroad) can hold beliefs so strong, that they believe the child is a witch, possessed by an evil spirit or that they are being affected in some way by evil eye or Black magic.

The Department for Education, Children in Need Census (2017/18) indicated that there were 1,630 assessments undertaken by Children’s Social Care that were found to have abuse linked to faith or belief as a risk factor at the end of the assessment. This is a 12 per cent increase in the volume of cases compared to the previous year and amounts to 30 cases per week.







¹ Department for Education (DfE) (2012) *National Action Plan to Tackle Child Abuse Linked to Faith or belief*





Risk Indicators

Although all children can be vulnerable to this type of abuse, the most vulnerable can include children perceived to be “different”. This “difference” may include children with learning and physical disabilities or special educational needs, mental health needs, epilepsy, autism, stammers and deafness. It may also include twins, children with albinism, left-handed children, highly intelligent, or with displaying behaviour considered “abnormal” such as disobedience, rebelliousness and insolence.

Trafficked children are a known vulnerable group and there are cases of them being subjected to “witchcraft” rituals prior to being trafficked, so that they will remain silent about the abuse. This can be very frightening for children.








The belief that the child is a witch or possessed may lead to parents/carers and/or others attempting to remove the perceived “evil” in them. Based on research, serious case reviews and case reviews, children considered “not normal” have suffered the following types of abuse during a process used to ‘cure’ or ‘deliver’ them:

Burning	<i>“Burning the evil out”</i>	
Drowning	<i>“Drowning out the spirit”</i>	
Starvation	<i>“Starving the spirit out”</i>	
Beatings	<i>“Beating the spirit out”</i>	
Cutting/Stabbing	<i>“Creating a way for the spirit to get out”</i>	
Substance in eyes	<i>“Blinding the evil spirit”</i>	

Ingestion of various concoctions	<i>"Purging the body of evil"</i>	
Muti-Sacrifice	<i>To create remedies or cures using body parts</i>	
(Semi) Strangulation	<i>"Squeeze the life out of the evil spirit"</i>	
Isolation/Being tied up	<i>"Stop the evil from spreading to others"</i>	

Signs or indicators a child is undergoing abuse linked to faith or belief

Most of the indicators may appear similar to other types of maltreatment.

A child's body showing signs or marks, such as <u>bruises or burns</u> , from physical abuse	
A child becoming noticeably <u>confused, withdrawn, disorientated or isolated</u> and appearing alone amongst other children	
A child's <u>personal care deteriorating</u> , 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 <u>child's parent does not show concern</u> for or a close bond with them	
A child's <u>attendance at school</u> becoming irregular, or being taken out of school altogether without another school place having been organised.	
A child reporting that they are or have been <u>accused of being evil</u> , and / or that they are having the devil beaten out of them.	
A child made to <u>wear some form of paraphernalia</u> that could be of a religious nature.	

Exploring Concerns Around Faith or Belief with **Parent(s)/Carer(s)**

Below are some examples of how staff can start a conversation with parent(s)/carer(s) regarding their concerns around faith or belief. Staff should use their professional judgement regarding which questions are relevant and appropriate to ask.

To open the conversation, state that **you have a “duty of care” to keep children safe** from harm.

Conversation Opener

“As you know, it is our responsibility to make sure children are happy and healthy. Part of ensuring this, is to explore any concerns we have with parent’s openly and transparently.”

Make sure the family knows you are there to support them, explain your role and let them know they are free to ask questions.

If you are worried because you observed safeguarding concerns (e.g. neglect, physical abuse etc), then you should explore the concern, taking action in line with your safeguarding policies/procedures or refer to children’s social care.

You can open the conversation by stating what you have observed or what the child has disclosed:

Exploring Observation or Disclosure

“Polly mentioned that you attend a place of worship quite often, and this is why she is tired. Can you tell me a bit more about this?”

Allow the parent(s)/carer(s) to lead the conversation. At this point it may be useful to refer to the questions in the “Normalising Conversations Around Faith or Belief” section to explore the family’s faith or belief more generally.

Ask open questions to explore with the parent(s)/carer(s) what the root cause of your concern may be. It may also be appropriate to explore if the family is currently under stress and if this has led them to turn more to their faith or belief for support or explore if here are any mental health needs.

Below are a few examples of the questions that you may ask parent(s)/carer(s) to explore the concern further.

Conversation Opener

“Jordan mentioned that he had been called ‘evil’/a ‘witch’ and we have noticed a change in his behaviour, can you tell me more about this”

Exploring Observation or Disclosure

“Do you believe that someone can be evil’/a ‘witch’?”

“How do you know if someone is evil’/a ‘witch’? Are there any physical signs?”

“What does your faith/belief say about this?”

“How do you think the evil/witch can be removed and have you taken any steps to doing this?”

“Why do you think Jordan is evil’/a ‘witch’?”

Concerns should be dealt with on a case by case basis, and the parent(s)/carer(s) should have the opportunity to talk through their beliefs/concerns in order to ascertain if there is a risk.

If a parent/carer believes the child is evil/a witch/possessed and suggests a **deliverance or exorcism** is needed then:

Exploring Observation or Disclosure

“Can you tell me more about what this involves?”

“Who would perform this and where?”

“If it doesn’t work, then what next?”

“Have you tried this before?”

“What else have you tried?”

Professionals must not endorse the parent’(s)/carer’(s) views or need for a deliverance as this reinforces the message being given to the child(ren) that they are evil/a witch.

Exploring Concerns Around Faith or Belief with Children

Below are scenarios you may come across (**which are not exhaustive**). We have highlighted some ways you can explore concerns around abuse linked to faith or belief in a sensitive and appropriate way. Do remember that there could be another explanation provided for some of these scenarios.

Scenario: A child reporting that they are or have been accused of being evil/devil/possessed.

Response: “Who told you this?” “What do you think they mean by this?”

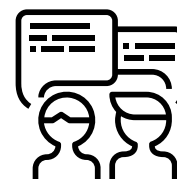
“When and how often has this taken place?”

“Do you believe X?”

“Who else knows about this?”

“How does that make you feel?”

“Can you tell me more about that?”



Scenario: A child says that they are going to be taken for a deliverance ceremony because they are possessed or affected by evil spirits.

Response: “Who said this to you and what do you mean by possessed and evil spirits”?

“What do you mean by deliverance ceremony”?

“Can you tell me who will be taking you and where?”

“Do you know why person thinks that”

“How is this making you feel?” “What would you like to happen?”

“Does your sibling know about this and what have they said?”

Remember: Reassure them that they did the right thing telling you, they are not evil/a witch/the devil and it is your job to keep them safe.



Scenario: The child is treated differently to other children in the family.

Response: “Can you tell me what home life is like for you?”

“I see you don’t want to go home, can you tell me why?”

“What is your relationship like with your parents/carers?”

“Can you tell me about your relationship is like with you siblings?”

“Can you tell me what your sibling’s relationship is like with your parents/carers?”

Scenario: A child says they attend a place of worship for long periods of time which is why they are tired during the day.

Response: “How often do you go to (place of worship) and with whom?”

“When do you go to (place of worship) and for how long?”

“Who do you go with?”

“What is the name of the place of worship?”

“What is the name of the faith leader(s)”?

“What do you do when you are there?”



Based on the answers the child gives, you may decide to make a referral to children’s social care. If the child is already known to children’s social care, the allocated social worker should discuss the concern with their manager and consider if a strategy meeting is required.

Please highlight that you are concerned the child may be at risk of CALFB, why, and include any details of the conversation had with the child, including any terminology used (See our [Language and Terminology Guide](#)). You can call the National FGM Centre for advice and guidance (details at the back).

After the conversation

Explore how the parent(s)/ carer(s) are feeling after the conversation and ensure that you have answered any questions that they may have. **Remember to be child focused.**

You will want to **speak to your safeguarding lead and/or line manager** to discuss anything you are worried about, including what the child said when you spoke to them (see our [question guide for working with children](#)) and if you need to make a referral to children's social care. If you make a referral, highlight your concerns about the welfare of the child and concerns about abuse linked to faith or belief and the risk of harm to the child.

Whether you decide to refer or not, you should **make a record of the conversation** and add it to the child's records.

Tips for social workers

Depending on the information shared in the referral, social workers may want to explore further some of the questions in the previous sections with parent(s)/carer(s) and children. You should use your professional judgement regarding which questions are relevant and appropriate to ask.

They can also explore:

- *What and why the parent(s)/carer(s) have accused the child of*
- *Other reasons that could explain the child's behaviour*
- *Other reasons to explain the misfortune that the family believe they are going through which is being attributed to the child*
- *Parent(s)/ carer(s)'s faith or belief and how this impacts on their lives and parenting capacity e.g. "on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest, how do you think your faith/ belief contributes to you being a parent/carer"*
- *Parent(s)/carer(s)'s views regarding their child(ren)'s involvement with their faith or belief.*

If parent(s)/carer(s) are **requesting deliverance or exorcism**, you may wish to explore the following:

- *Whose opinion is it that a deliverance or exorcism is needed?*
- *What does the deliverance or exorcism involve?*
- *Who has to perform the deliverance or exorcism?*
 - *Where will it take place and for how long?*
- *Will the child be harmed or upset? If yes, why?*
- *Will the child be taken overseas?*
- *Does it cost anything and if yes, how much?*
- *What will happen if it does not work?*

Consult school regarding the child's:

- Eating habits
- Concentration in class
- Achievement patterns
- School nurse records and any changes in weight
- Any marks on body noticed in PE or otherwise/withdrawal from PE

Consult health regarding:

- Any recent GP visits
- Any changes in weight or health

Consult the police regarding:

- Any family history with the police
- Any information on places of worship

The social worker may also want to contact the family's local place of worship to talk to their faith leader about any concerns.

It is important parent(s)/ carer(s) understand:

- They are entitled to have beliefs, however when it has a detrimental effect on their child's emotional/physical health, it is unacceptable and considered child abuse.
- For a child, the accusation itself (even when not accompanied by physical abuse) can be psychological damaging and impact their emotional wellbeing and self-esteem.

For more information on exploring faith or belief in an assessment please view our ['Question guide for Social Workers: Exploring faith or belief within an assessment'](#) available on our website.

You can also seek advice from the National FGM Centre.