

Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Abuse

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Developing excellence
in response to FGM and
other harmful practices



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Dr Lisa Oakley is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Chester. She is also the Chair of the National working group for child abuse linked to faith or belief and the Church of England Task and Finish Group on Spiritual Abuse. Lisa has conducted research into issues of faith, safeguarding and abuse for the past 15 years. She has spoken at international and national conferences and led several projects and undertaken consultancy work on these topics. Prior to joining the University of Chester, Lisa was programme leader at Manchester Metropolitan University for the only undergraduate course in Abuse Studies in the UK.



Contents

PAGE 1

WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE LINKED TO FAITH OR BELIEF?

*HOW MANY CASES OF CHILD ABUSE LINKED TO FAITH OR BELIEF
ARE THERE?*

PAGE 2

*WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FOR PRACTITIONERS WORKING IN
THIS AREA*

PAGE 3

*WHAT IS THE NATIONAL WORKING GROUP FOR CHILD ABUSE
LINKED TO FAITH OR BELIEF*

PAGE 4

*WHAT IS THE NATIONAL ACTION PLAN FOR CHILD ABUSE LINKED
TO FAITH OR BELIEF
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE*

What is child abuse linked to faith or belief (CALFB)?

Cases such as that of Victoria Climbié and Kristy Bamu raised the profile of child abuse related to beliefs in spirit possession and witchcraft. The practices associated with this form of abuse are not new, however it is still a relatively little understood area.

A child may face accusations of spirit possession or witchcraft related to negative life events or a noticeable difference in the child, and methods to exorcise the spirit can include a range of behaviours from prayer to beating, burning and starving (Stobart, 2006).



Victoria Climbié



Kristy Bamu

How many cases of child abuse linked to faith or belief are there?

At the present time we do not have an accurate understanding of how prevalent this form of abuse is. However, in 2017 the ‘children need census’, taken in England, included the category of child abuse linked faith or belief for the first time.

*There were **1,461 cases recorded**, which amounts to four a day. Analysis of the data is needed to identify any patterns and importantly to explore exactly what practices and forms of abuse were being identified in this category.*

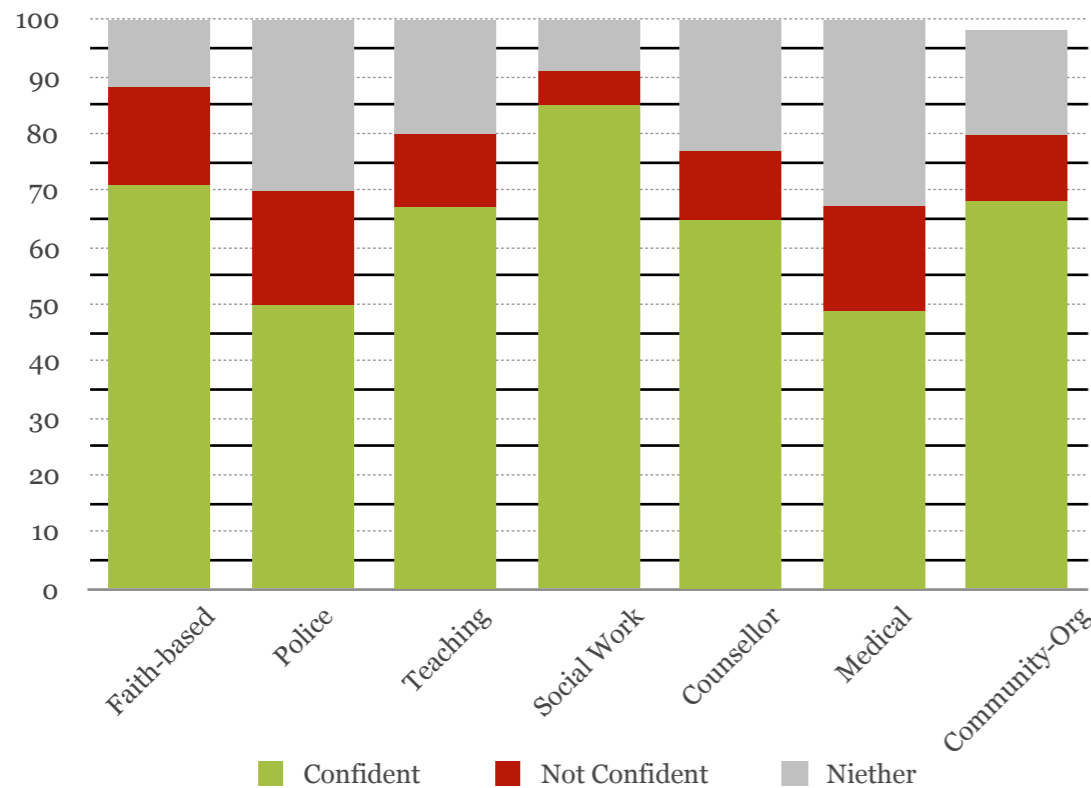
However, the figures suggest that there is an urgent need to understand child abuse linked faith or belief better and to develop effective intervention and support. The National FGM Centre are beginning to map the number of cases where FGM and CALFB are both experienced by the same child.

What are the challenges for practitioners working in this area?

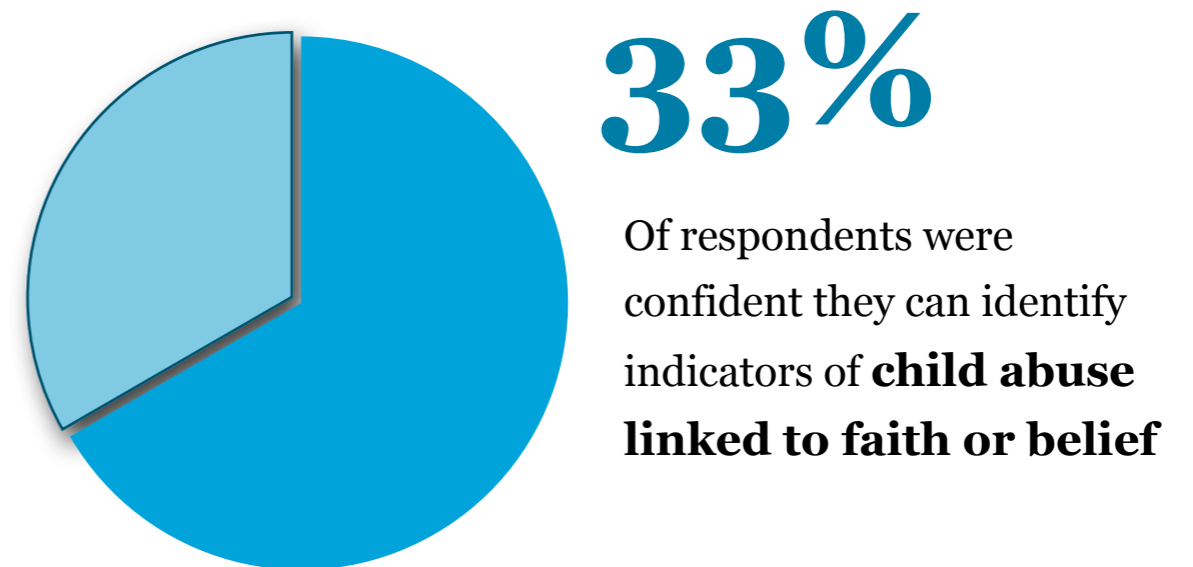
Recent research has been conducted by Manchester Metropolitan University, CCPAS and VCF (Oakley, Kinmond, Humphreys & Dioum, 2017) with 1,361 frontline practitioners (social work, teaching, counselling, police, medicine/health care) community organisations and faith communities about CALFB.

However, it was clear that a range of different definitions were being employed. These included child abuse due to belief in spirit possession or witchcraft, but also child abuse due to belief in excessive physical punishment of children and medical neglect. Other respondents discussed FGM and HBV as possible forms of CALFB. The research showed the need to develop a clear definition.

Levels of confidence in understanding what CALFB is



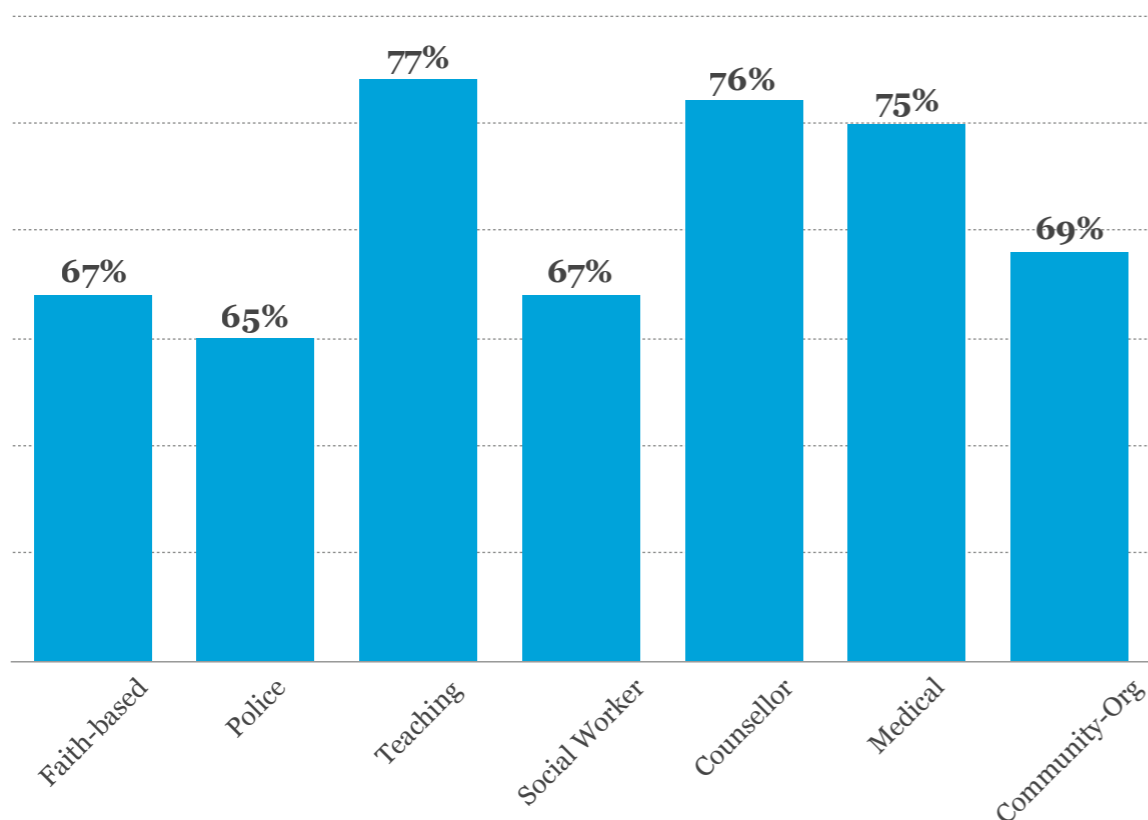
Overall 61% were confident they understood the term CALFB.



Only a third of respondents were confident in identifying indicators of CALFB and 52% were confident in responding professionally. Only 25% had received training specifically on CALFB.

Overall there was a clear call for additional support in working with CALFB.

Percentage of professionals identifying need for additional support



Other challenges in this area included **lack of experience** of working on cases of CALFB as one respondent noted “I have never personally encountered a case of child abuse linked to faith and belief”. Another challenge identified is **multi-agency working**, as one respondent noted “The fact that so few cases get directly referred and yet at training sessions it is often raised, suggests that it is happening but we don’t know how to work together as agencies to tackle it”. **Perceived mistrust between statutory agencies and faith-based agencies** is another challenge, as one respondent reflected, “we don’t trust them, and we don’t think they trust us” and a lack of understanding about faith and belief was seen by some as a barrier to work in this area;

“The things I do not yet know about are Faith Constructs, particular religions, or belief structures”.

The research indicated the need for training on CALFB and support for the development of an Online Toolkit to provide information about indicators and pathways for response.

What is the national working group for child abuse linked to faith or belief

The national working group is comprised of representatives from statutory services, NGOs, academic institutions, faith and voluntary organisations.

It currently meets three times a year with a focus on: protecting children and young people from CALFB through raising awareness, developing and promoting best practice in prevention and response and ensuring that knowledge and understanding increases through education.



What is the national action plan for child abuse linked to faith or belief?

In 2012 the National action plan for child abuse linked faith or belief was developed. This plan contained key themes and recommendations for improving practice. However, the recent research showed that only 12% of respondents were aware of the national action plan. The national working group is currently revising the national action plan in order to create a strategy for addressing child abuse linked faith or belief in 2018.

Looking to the future

It is clear that further research in the area of CALFB is required and there is a pressing need to disseminate training. Further, a toolkit to underpin identification and response is a priority in this area. However, currently there is very limited funding and relatively little government investment in this issue and this restricts the ability to develop work in this area currently.

A PDF of the overview of the research findings is available at <http://files.ccpas.co.uk/documents/CAFB%20Results-%20Interactive%20-%20E%20Leaflet.pdf>