

Witchcraft labelling spirit procession

**Warning: contains sensitive information which some readers may find distressing and upsetting*

Child protection cases based upon faith or religious beliefs increased in England by a third in 2019. Themes such as witchcraft abuse or the belief that children can be spirit possessed and the harmful religious practices that occur as a result of this however are not new. Recent reports may have recognised an increase in these practices and subsequent abuse but in addition to this we need to take into account other contributing factors. For example, increased reporting also suggests that more professionals working with children are now better informed to identify and recognise these hidden cultural and complex factors of abuse. This results in appropriate interventions and actions taking place because of increased awareness.

Children associated with witchcraft abuse

Victoria Climbié who died in 2000 aged eight years of age was accused of being processed by an evil spirit by her great aunt with whom she lived on arrival from the Ivory Coast as a seven year old. The accusation by her aunt led to shocking physical abuse and torture of Victoria. A public enquiry undertaken by Lord Laming into Victoria's death included evidence from a pastor at the church where she attended with her aunt. He believed Victoria to be 'possessed by evil spirits' and had on a number of occasions prayed for her to be 'delivered from witchcraft and evil spirits'. He told the inquiry that he thought her shocking injuries, a result of physical abuse by aunt and her boyfriend, to be an actual sign of witchcraft and procession. Victoria Climbié died from persistent and enduring physical abuse and torture delivered by great aunt and her great aunts' boyfriend. Victoria was also frequently starved of food before she died.

Khyra Ishaq who died in 2008 aged seven years of age was starved to death by her mother and stepfather who believed her to be processed by an evil spirit. Khyra was severely neglected and malnourished which directly led to her developing bronchial pneumonia and septicaemia with focal bacterial meningitis just before she died. Her mother and stepfather were both convicted of her manslaughter. They were charged with causing and allowing the death of a child and five other offences of cruelty in relation to other children living in the family household.

There have been various published serious case reviews that feature witchcraft abuse in the abuse of children and young people.

Faith groups and the belief in evil spirits

A number of religions and faith groups acknowledge a belief in spirits with some recognising both good and evil features of these spirits. Some within the Christian church believes in spirit procession and make a distinction between the Holy Spirit and evil spirits. Islam also recognises the existence of evil spirits. Some traditional African beliefs lead some to believe that people and children can be taken over by evil spirits.

What is witchcraft?

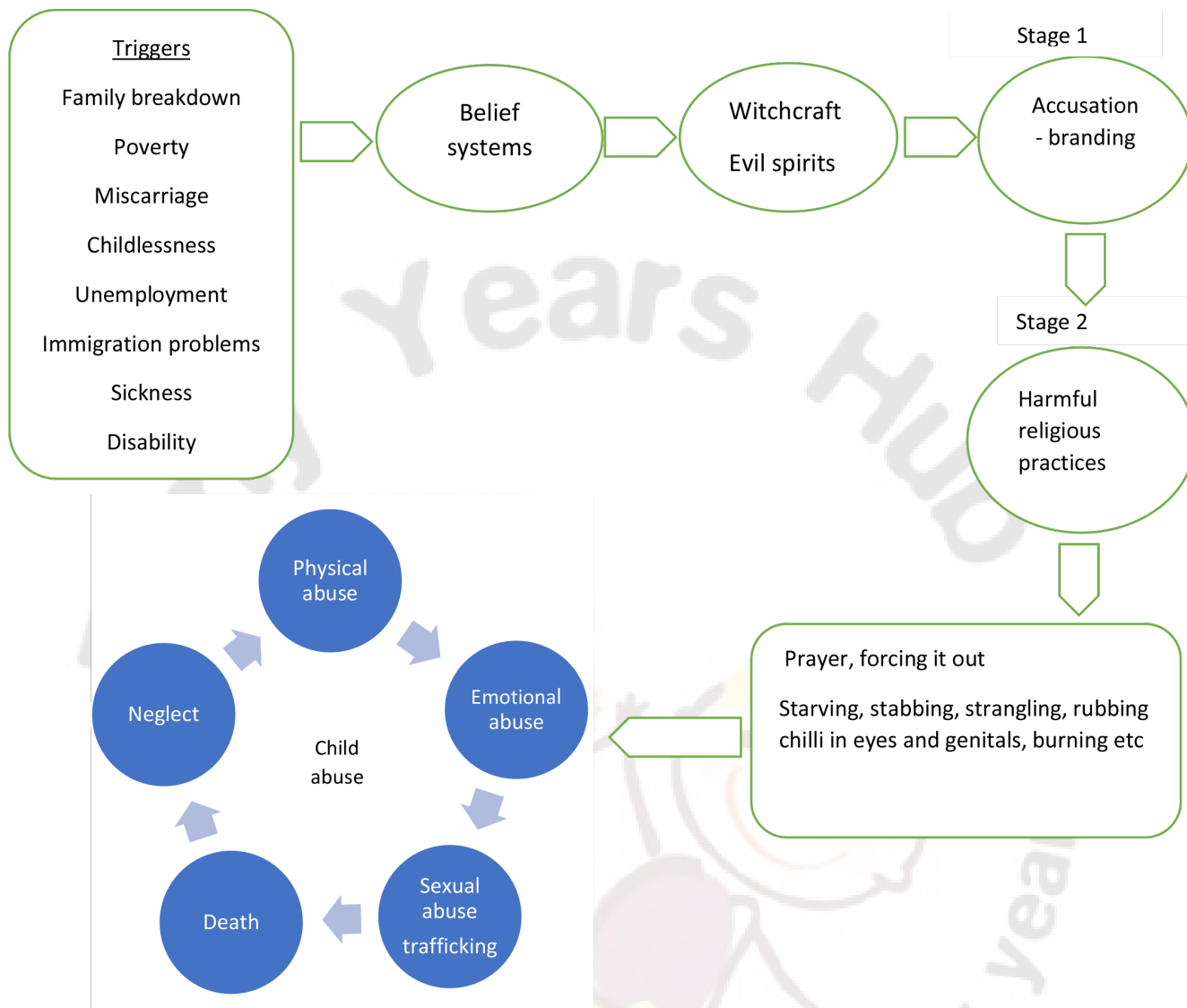
Witchcraft can have different meanings and can apply in a number of contexts. Africans Unite Against Child Abuse (AFRUCA) suggests that witchcraft is 'the invocation of alleged supernatural powers to control people or events, using sorcery or magic'.

What is witchcraft abuse?

In terms of abuse those believed to be possessed by evil spirits are sometimes branded as witches. It is also thought by some that these evil spirits seek to find victims in order to promote evil deeds through them. Spirits will therefore override a person's ability to make choices causing them to behave in certain ways that are outside of their control. It is believed that they will act unconsciously unaware of the evil they are causing. Signs of challenging or 'bad' behaviour in children can be interpreted as being influenced by evil spirits and as such they are labelled as witches. Children can also be branded as witches when unexplained or adverse circumstances or events occur to them, their families or those around them. Often children are blamed or scapegoated to be the reason why these things are happening. Various triggers can lead children to being labelled as witches. These may include things such as poverty, deprivation, unemployment, ill health, lack of success and so on.

By its own definition blaming a child for negative experiences and labelling them a witch is obviously emotionally abusive. Consequently, further harm will follow, and children will be exposed to harm as a form of punishment and, or as part of a process that supposedly exorcises or expels the evil spirit from the child.

Stages of witchcraft abuse



Children at risk of abuse

The following are examples of some groups of children who have been accused of witchcraft abuse;

- Children with disabilities such as autism, downs syndrome, dyslexia or epilepsy
- Privately fostered children
- Children whose parents have been branded witches
- Children who are naughty, display challenging behaviour or perceived to be rude
- Children with mental health problems
- Children struggling with sexual identity
- Children with special educational needs
- Children who are left handed
- Children living in broken families
- Exceptionally bright children who are high achievers

Categories of abuse and neglect in witchcraft abuse

Physical abuse can be displayed by beating the evil spirit out of the child with use of objects and heavy instruments. It can include kicking, punching and other forms of physical assault. Fasting can also be imposed upon a child leading to starvation.

Emotional abuse underpins the many elements of abuse recognised as a result of witchcraft labelling. Ostracising a child, blaming them for adverse situations, isolating them from others, making them believe that they are evil and have done wrong are just some examples of the emotional effects upon a child.

Neglect in the form of starvation, depriving a child of food, withholding medical attention and refusing to meet the emotional and psychological needs of a child all constitute abuse in this category. A child who is denied educational opportunities by removing them from school and not providing them with another means of education is also deemed as neglect.

Sexual abuse may occur as a child is isolated from others within the family, removing elements of protective factors that otherwise would be available to them. The more de-valued the child becomes in the context of family and community the more vulnerable they are to sexual abuse.

Some signs that may suggest a child is experiencing witchcraft abuse

- Unexplained bruises or marks on the body including incisions or burns
- Child believes that they are bad and will go to hell
- They are ostracised by family, members of the community or faith group to which they belong
- Irregular or non- attendance at school
- Tells others that they are fasting
- Is malnourished or scavenges for food
- Deterioration in the child's well-being
- Non-attendance to medical needs or not taken to hospital when ill or injured

ALWAYS FOLLOW THE CORRECT PROCEDURES TO PROTECT A CHILD. CONCERNS ABOUT A CHILD'S WELFARE OR SAFETY MUST BE REPORTED IMMEDIATELY TO STATUTORY SERVICES WITHOUT DELAY.

**Content adapted from 'What is witchcraft abuse'? written and published by Africans Unite Against Child Abuse (AFRUCA) has been used to inform this factsheet.*