



Safeguarding children controlled through belief in ritual oaths, 'child witches', or religious and traditional practices

The ECPAT UK 'Understanding...' series aims to provide useful information on issues of child exploitation, such as background context, definitions, current trends, indicators and tips for good practice.

Research and professionals' experience in the UK shows that child victims of trafficking are controlled through physical and psychological methods. Children often experience threats, violence, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, leaving them feeling powerless and petrified to speak out about their experiences of exploitation. Disclosures from young people enable an understanding that practices such as the use of rituals, accusations of possession and witchcraft are being used as control methods.

This document aims to highlight the key indicators which connect these practices to child trafficking for sexual exploitation, forced labour and domestic servitude and offers practice guidance for practitioners who may work with child victims.

1. Definitions and Trends

This section considers types of practices used and the typical trends which link them to trafficking.

'Child Witches'

In some countries vulnerable groups, such as women, older people and more recently children, have been blamed for misfortune in society, such as poverty, illness, bad luck etc. This may result in children being labelled as 'witches'. This typically involves the belief that children are possessed and that an evil force has entered a child and is controlling him or her. The accusations may come from family members, community members, or pastors or priests who profess to have the power to identify witches and 'exorcise' the child. This may lead to fear of the child as the family and community believe the child can use evil to harm or 'infect' others.

Ritual Oaths

Children may take part in ritual oaths before they leave their country of origin which they are told is to keep them or their traffickers safe. A child will provide some of their hair, blood or personal belongings which will be contained in a 'packet' and the child is taken to a shrine or graveyard to swear an oath or promise.

The oath may be designed to ensure ongoing beauty and prosperity of the child, but often is used to prevent them from speaking out about their experiences, from running away, or as a means of ensuring that they work off a 'debt'. This 'debt' is a huge figure that increases as the trafficker sees fit, leaving the child unable to ever pay it off. The trafficker who facilitates this may often have built a relationship with the child, presenting as a boyfriend or friend. The child may believe that if they betray their trafficker, either they or a member of their family will suffer severe consequences, including death.

Use of Witchcraft, Religious and Traditional Practices

Frequent reports from victims refer to these practices as 'voodoo' or 'juju', but there are many other descriptions depending on their country of origin namely, 'kindoki', 'ndoki', 'djinns', or 'obeah'. The misuse of these practices has led to children being controlled by their traffickers. The traffickers cast 'spells' or 'curses' on the child. This leads the child to believe that they will suffer consequences such as death to them or their family if they tell anyone about their exploitation. Spells may be placed directly on children or through more covert methods, such as putting 'medicine, herbs or magic' in food or drink.

"They made me drink this tea and it made me feel dizzy, that is how they got inside my head."

Young Person, ECPAT UK Youth Group

The child may also be led to believe that the traffickers are masters of this practice using it to influence others by taking the form of people, seeing through other peoples' eyes or controlling their mind.

"There is no point trying to convince my social worker, [the trafficker] said she would stop him from hearing me." Young Person, ECPAT UK Youth Group



2. Control

This section lists some examples of the methods traffickers use to control their victims.

Child 'Witches'

Rejection and Isolation - When a child is accused of being 'possessed' or a 'witch' the family and community may reject them which often results in the child living on the streets. Once homeless they are an easy target for traffickers to abduct and exploit; they are isolated with no one to care for them. Traffickers may use this method to recruit children by convincing parents the child is a 'witch'.

"The lady came and they were talking. My grandmother suddenly said "abomination!" I was sent out and the next day I went with the lady."

Young Person, ECPAT UK Youth Group

Manipulating a Child's Belief - If a child is told by people they love and respect that they are a 'witch', this may result in the child believing it themselves and thus believing their exploitation is justified because they are 'evil'.

"They told me I was evil and made bad things happen. I believed it and that this was my punishment and what my life would be."

Young Person, ECPAT UK Youth Group

Ritual Oaths

The Promise/Oath - The child lays great importance on the 'oath' they have made, often feeling indebted to their trafficker. They may be very reluctant to talk or escape, fearing the consequences or being seen as someone who cannot keep their word.

The Packet - the oath often involves taking their hair, blood, nails etc and storing them in a 'packet', The trafficker keeps the 'packet' and uses this as a way to threaten and control the child during their exploitation. The child may believe that whoever holds the packet can control them. This may be passed between the people exploiting the child.

Use of Witchcraft, Religious and Traditional Practices

Medicine, Drinks, Spells and Curses - During their exploitation the child may be forced to drink tea or another beverage and ingest food or the trafficker may cast a 'spell' using different objects. This may make the child believe that they are controlled through 'magic' and that the trafficker can control and harm them.

Control of Other Adults - The child may believe that the trafficker can control and cast 'spells' on other people and workers e.g. the social worker, or police. This can affect their relationship with any practitioner as they will be more reluctant to disclose or trust them fearing that they are being manipulated and controlled by the trafficker.

Being Watched - Some children believe that the trafficker can take the form of another person or see through their eyes. They feel wherever they go the traffickers are able to find them and watch what they are doing through others, even follow them and find out where they live.

"I know it sounds stupid, but I thought that was her [the trafficker] in that person's body and she was watching me." Young Person, ECPAT UK Youth Group

3. Indicators

These indicators are meant as a guide for practitioners but are not exhaustive. It is important to note that a while a child accused of being a 'witch' is not necessarily controlled through 'voodoo' or similar practices, many of the indicators overlap.

Child

- Physical abuse: burns, shaking, strangulation or smothering, cutting, starvation, beating, signs of burns to eyes or genitalia
- Stands out from others, this may include: a learning disability, noticeably brighter or less intelligent, over confident, challenging, disruptive or has a physical disfigurement
- Looks malnourished, unkempt or has faeces smeared on their body/clothes
- Lack of attendance or withdrawal from school
- Isolates him/herself, does not mix with other children
- Describes him/herself as 'evil' or a 'bad child'
- Desperate to stay with an adult even though may be visibly fearful of them
- Will lie about what country they are from and give a story similar to those practitioners have heard before
- Reluctant to talk about adults they are living with/have a connection with
- Petrified of adults and believe them to be very powerful
- Has no documents and few, if any, belongings.

Carers

- Accuses/blames child for family stress, ill health, loss of job, bad luck etc.
- Poor attachment/weak bond with child
- Perceives the child as 'different' or 'evil'
- Claims to be parent or relative, but cannot provide documentary proof
- Believes in witchcraft or evil spirits
- Is linked to a church or place of worship known to perform abusive child 'exorcisms'
- Previously known to have physically abused children.

Environment

- Found in a place of sexual exploitation e.g. brothel, nail bar
- Living in a suspected private fostering arrangement
- Family come from a country or area known to practice witchcraft or other practices which can be used cast 'spells' or 'curses'.



4. Practitioner Response

These guidelines and practice tips are meant as a general aid for practitioners working with children. Practitioners should consult local and national guidance and safeguarding procedures for a detailed response.

Recognise at risk children

Research has shown that children accused of being 'witches' have often been physically abused and even murdered. If practitioners feel the child is at risk of being abused then action is required immediately to safeguard the child. This may require contacting the Police or Social Services, both of whom can initiate emergency action. If there are other children in the house consideration should also be given to potential risk to them.

Believe the child

No matter what personal beliefs are about religion and spiritual practices and what impression practitioners have of the child, it is important that the child is believed. Children may disclose something which sounds incredible; this does not mean it is not true. This may be the first time the child has disclosed and they should be listened to with understanding and openness.

Talk to the child away from any adults

It is very important to talk to the child in a safe place, away from any adults, where they can talk without feeling threatened or intimidated. Ensure that the child's mobile phone is switched off for the duration of any meetings.

Feel comfortable talking about the issues

Practitioners should try as best they can to feel comfortable talking about the practices mentioned in this document. Attention should be paid to the language that the child is using; practitioners should ensure they understand the same meaning as the child when using words. It is important that the child does not feel isolated or guilty when talking about their experiences.

Local Authorities should build relationships with churches and religious institutions

Whilst it is important to ensure that a child's religious or spiritual needs are met, caution must be exercised when forming this link. Research has shown that some religious institutions have been known to accuse children of being 'witches' and have offered an 'exorcism' service which can lead to abuse of the child. The Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS) provides information and training on all aspects of child protection, including providing information on prayer and exorcism.

Ask questions

Traffickers lie and will persuade children to lie too. If something does not feel right practitioners should not be afraid to ask questions or investigate further. The practitioner should explain to the child that they understand they may have had pressure put on them to say something which is not quite true. Practitioners need to be clear about family relationships, knowing who is who and checking identity documents.

Remove all belongings from place of exploitation

If a child is taken into care practitioners should ensure their belongings are removed immediately from their place of exploitation. Leaving their belongings behind may cause the child to be fearful that the trafficker will use these to cast 'spells' or 'curses' on them.

Building trust takes time

Children are often threatened and controlled by their traffickers. It may be months or even years before they feel safe and able to disclose information about their experience. Children may be fearful that the practitioners working with them are connected to, or controlled by the trafficker.

Do not be afraid to challenge child abuse, no matter what culture the child comes from

Child abuse is unacceptable in any culture or religion. If practitioners feel uncomfortable challenging or working with people from a particular culture, they should ask for assistance or advice from colleagues or their manager.

“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.”

Safeguarding Children from Abuse Linked to a Belief in Spirit Possession, DCSF



5. Resources and Contacts

Resources

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

Available at: www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications

Child Abuse Linked to Accusations of "Possession" and "Witchcraft", Eleanor Stobart, 2007.

Available at:
www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR750.pdf

Statement of Guiding Principles and Best Practice for Working with Children Stigmatised as 'Witches', Stepping Stones Nigeria, 2009.

Available at: www.steppingstonesnigeria.org

What is Witchcraft Abuse? Safeguarding African Children in the UK - Series 5, AFRUCA, 2009.

Available at: www.afruca.org.uk

Contacts

ECPAT UK

End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking

ECPAT UK is the UK representative of the global ECPAT movement, a network in over 70 countries. ECPAT UK campaigns against child trafficking and children exploited in tourism and provides training and advice to the statutory and voluntary sector on safeguarding children who may have been trafficked.

Tel: +44 (0)207 233 9887

Email: info@ecpat.org.uk

Web: www.ecpat.org.uk

VCF

The Victoria Climbié Foundation UK

VCF offers practical guidance, training, advocacy and support services to children, families, communities, and the statutory and voluntary sectors – on matters of child protection – with specialist knowledge and expertise in working across cultures and faiths.

Tel: +44 (0)208 571 4121

Email: info@victoria-climbié.org.uk

Web: www.victoria-climbié.org.uk

Stepping Stones Nigeria

Stepping Stones Nigeria is dedicated to supporting the rights of vulnerable and exploited children, such as the so called 'child witches' and 'wizards' of the Niger Delta. Working with local community organisations, they deliver education, refuge, healthcare and lasting hope for a brighter future. Through advocacy and research they campaign at a local, national and international level to put a stop to the abuse of innocent children.

Tel: +44 (0)845 313 8397

Email: info@steppingstonesnigeria.org

Web: www.steppingstonesnigeria.org

AFRUCA - Africans Unite Against Child Abuse

AFRUCA works with children, families, communities and the statutory and voluntary sector on child protection and safeguarding issues. It also provides specialist training for practitioners working with children on African cultural and religious practices.

Tel: +44 (0)844 660 8607

Email: info@afruca.org

Web: www.afruca.org

Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service

CCPAS liaises with Local Safeguarding Children Boards, Children Services and the police and provides advice, guidance and support on issues relating to accusations of witchcraft, particularly for places of worship and faith-based groups.

Tel: +44 (0)845 120 4550

Email: info@ccpas.co.uk

Web: www.ccpas.co.uk

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For further information or details of ECPAT UK training courses, please contact:

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