



# Witchcraft, spirit possession and ritualistic abuse (WSPRA) in serious case reviews

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Partnership Learning Briefing

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## Note to readers

This document contains descriptions of ritualised child sexual abuse that some readers may find distressing. Please prioritise your wellbeing. Feel free to skip sections, take breaks or choose not to continue reading.



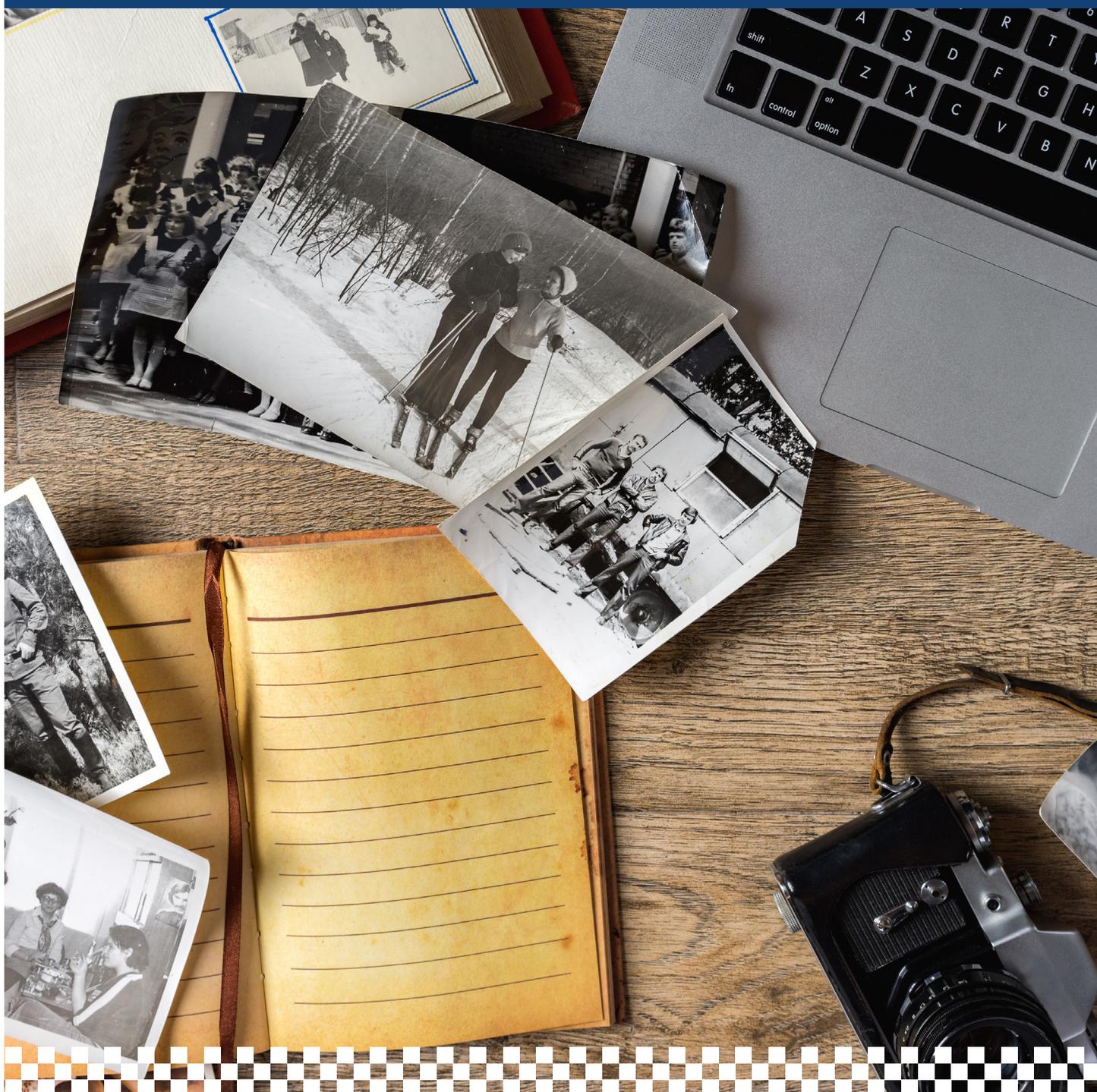
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# Purpose

This briefing summarises key learning from nine UK case reviews involving witchcraft, spirit possession and ritualistic practices linked to child abuse and neglect. It aims to support multi-agency practitioners in recognising risks and improving safeguarding responses.

All cases were identified via the NSPCC National Collection of Case Reviews (<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/case-reviews>).



# Understanding witchcraft, spirit possession and ritualistic abuse

The National Police Chief's Council definition of witchcraft, spirit possession and ritualistic abuse is

**Ritualistic abuse, witchcraft and spirit possession refer to forms of sexual abuse, harm, mistreatment, or exploitation inflicted on individuals – both children and adults – within the context of structured belief systems, rituals or practices that attribute supernatural significance to the abuse. These may involve coercion, violence, psychological manipulation, or exploitation, often justified by beliefs in spiritual forces, purification, or supernatural interventions.**

**Spirit possession: abuse linked to attempts to exorcise or deliver an individual believed to controlled by malevolent spirits.**

**Witchcraft: abuse resulting from accusations of causing harm through spiritual means, often linked to beliefs in spiritual power or misfortune.**

**Harmful ritual practices: structured or symbolic acts of violence believed to yield supernatural benefit (for example, forced spiritual healing ceremonies or ritual killings).**

These practices often overlap with other forms of abuse (such as sexual abuse, violence against women and girls and trafficking) and are shaped by cultural, familial and online influences. Victims may be targeted due to perceived 'differences,' such as disability, neurodivergence or LGBTQ+ identity.



It is important to emphasise that spiritual and religious beliefs are not inherently harmful. Abuse occurs when belief systems are exploited to justify coercion, control, or harm.

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It is important that this review considers the context of extreme religious beliefs followed by Mr and Mrs Y, and how that was used to instil fear and create severe recriminations for the children. Choosing to follow a faith in a strict and dedicated manner is something that many families do. This does not normally become something which can be viewed as abusive. However, in this situation it could be argued that Mr and Mrs Y used their interpretation of their chosen faith to go beyond the teachings of that faith to exercise total control and influence over their children. They used rules that they described to the children as essential to their religion to coerce and control all aspects of the children's lives. This included severe emotional and physical abuse.

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CYSUR6/2018

# Background

Case reviews are conducted when a child dies or suffers serious harm due to abuse or neglect. The aim is to identify how professionals and organisations can improve the way they work together to safeguard children, both nationally and locally.

The reviews analysed here involved the presence of witchcraft, spirit possession and ritualistic abuse indicators.

All but two of the nine cases were 'serious case reviews' as established under the Children Act 2004. These were replaced by Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRS) in 2018/19 following changes in the child safeguarding systems and updated statutory guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018'.

Further information on search criteria and results are available at Appendix 1.



# Key Features of Reviews

## Ages of children

Ages are stated within eight of the reviews and range from six weeks old to 14 years. Four of the children concerned were under the age of one.

## Vulnerabilities

None of the reviews relate to child sexual abuse or exploitation. Five of the reviews concerned physical abuse, with serious neglect and emotional abuse a prominent vulnerability across all reviews. One review related to severe malnutrition, and another contained a history of refusal of medical treatment. Six of the children died as a result of their abuse.

## Family Backgrounds

Six of the children had large families, either by way of an original entire family unit or a blend of family units as parents entered second relationships. These family units exhibited a number of cross-cutting vulnerabilities, including drug misuse, mental ill-health, domestic abuse and housing issues. Islam, Christianity, and Evangelical beliefs were named within the reviews, and four of the families were of African origin. One review included a child with significant mental ill-health and another a child with 'learning difficulties.' Five of the reviews involved children who were electively home educated or who had significant absences from education.

## Witchcraft, spiritual possession and ritualistic abuse

The following key words were expressly used within the reviews.

- Witchcraft
- Voodoo
- Bible
- Exorcism
- Demons
- Spirits
- Jinn
- Deliverance
- Hijama
- Spirit Possession
- Djinn
- Evil
- Bad
- Bad Luck



# Key Findings from the Reviews

## Thematic overview

### Religious and Spiritual Abuse

- Several cases involved extreme interpretations of religious beliefs (Christianity, Islam, Evangelical), to justify coercive control, physical punishment, emotional abuse and neglect.
- Beliefs in spirit possession, witchcraft, jinn or demons were used to explain children's behaviour or disabilities, often leading to harmful practices like exorcism or isolation.

### Cultural Assumptions and Barriers

- Professionals often failed to challenge cultural or religious practices that were harmful, due to assumptions or lack of cultural competence.
- There were missed opportunities to explore disclosures related to voodoo, witchcraft or spiritual beliefs especially when raised by children.

### Elective Home Education (EHE) and Isolation

- EHE was a recurring factor, often used to remove children from oversight, contributing to invisibility from statutory services.
- Families were frequently isolated from extended networks, sometimes due to religious or cultural beliefs.

### Professional Practice

- Disguised compliance, lack of professional curiosity and failure to share cross-border informed were noted.
- Agencies often missed signs of abuse due to fragmented information, or assumptions about culture norms.

### Mental Health and Disability

- Children with SEND or mental health needs were viewed as possessed or cursed, leading to neglect and abuse.
- Parental mental ill-health and its interaction with religious beliefs was poorly understood or addressed.



# Key Learning

The significant key learning points identified within the reviews are:

- Promote professional curiosity and avoid assumptions based on cultural norms.
- Training is needed for professionals to understand and sensitively explore religious and spiritual beliefs, without colluding with harmful practices.
- Multi-agency collaboration must be strengthened, with clear roles and responsibilities.
- Safeguarding must override cultural sensitivity when a child is at risk.
- Recording and data sharing between health, education and social care is critical to identify invisible children.
- Strengthen oversight of EHE and improve centralised data sharing.
- Trauma informed practice is essential, especially in culturally complex contexts.



# Recommendations for local multi-agency safeguarding practice

## Training and Workforce

Equip practitioners across safeguarding agencies with the knowledge, confidence and skills to identify and respond to WRSPA-related risks and harms, whilst maintaining cultural sensitivity and safeguarding priorities.

When addressing WSPRA, practitioners must avoid assumptions and instead apply informed curiosity—recognising that while faith and spirituality are integral to many families, harmful interpretations can lead to abuse, neglect and coercive control. Practitioners should have the confidence to challenge harmful practices both respectfully and lawfully.

## Policy and Practice

Embed WSPRA risks in local strategies and procedures, including a clear definition of witchcraft, spirit possession and ritualistic abuse and that it is a safeguarding risk. Outline procedures for identification and response.

EHE is linked to invisibility of children in these cases. The Children Wellbeing and Schools Bill aims to change the law to better protect children, and these changes include reform to:

- introduce children not in school registers
- require local authority consent for home education in prescribed circumstances
- empower local authorities to visit homes and assess suitability of education.

Local adoption and embedding of such reforms should be with a lens on the risks and harms of WSPRA.

## Multi-Agency Collaboration

Local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements should consider joint training across policing, social care, health, education and voluntary and faith sectors on WSPRA indicators and responses. This should also enable common language and definitions to avoid ambiguity in referrals and assessments.

Information sharing protocols can be assessed to establish if they are suitable for recording and sharing WSPRA concerns across agencies. Cross-border communications must be improved where families move between local authorities.

With regard to joint assessment, arrangements should include multi-agency risk assessments criteria that include cultural and spiritual factors and inform strategy meetings.

## Community Engagement

Community engagement is an effective strategy for reducing harms and risks associated with WSPRA. It can address the root causes of isolation, misinformation and fear. By building trust and awareness with faith leaders, and bringing them into safeguarding arrangements, myths can be dispelled and clarify that safeguarding cannot collude with harmful practices.

Co-produced awareness campaigns can explain the difference between cultural/religious practices and harmful abuse, reducing



stigma and secrecy. Creating culturally sensitive reporting routes into statutory and non-statutory services can encourage families and communities to seek help without fear of judgment. Building on community engagement can help families to connect with mainstream services and reduce isolation and pressure to resort to harmful practices.

## Data and Intelligence

Use of data and intelligence across multi-agencies is crucial if arrangements are to understand not just prevalence, threat, and scale, but also how to respond to risk. WSPRA cases often involve hidden children, fragmented information and cross-border movements.

Standardised recording and flagging of WSPRA references and indicators across case management systems will improve response, review and disruption. The use of the single unique identifier proposed by the Children Wellbeing and Schools Bill can support this aim.

Use of aggregated data can support intelligence led risk profiling and planning of responses, preventions, and intervention. Intelligence can inform training priorities, shape community engagement strategies, and help target approaches for supporting children not in education.

## Support for Children and Families

Multi-agency partners must ensure children are both seen and heard in WSPRA cases by prioritising direct contact and visibility, even when families are isolated or electively home educating. This means conducting home visits, speaking to the child alone, and using trusted adults or interpreters to overcome cultural and language barriers. Agencies should share chronologies and flag WSPRA indicators

across systems to prevent invisibility, while joint visits and escalation protocols guarantee accountability if a child is not seen. Empowering children through advocacy, rights education, and safe spaces for disclosure, combined with rigorous monitoring of school attendance and health checks, can ensure their voice is central to safeguarding decisions.

Supporting children affected by witchcraft, spirit possession and ritualistic abuse requires a trauma-informed approach that prioritises safety, trust, and empowerment. These children often experience profound fear, shame and confusion due to coercive control and harmful rituals. Practitioners should recognise the psychological impact of such abuse, including hypervigilance, dissociation and mistrust of adults. Trauma-informed practice means creating predictable, safe environments, using calm and non-judgmental communication, and validating the child's experiences without reinforcing harmful beliefs. Professionals must avoid re-traumatisation by respecting cultural identity while challenging abusive practices, and ensure interventions focus on restoring the child's sense of control and belonging through consistent care, advocacy, and therapeutic support.

Specialist support must be tailored to children's unique needs, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), who may be particularly vulnerable to harmful practices such as exorcism or physical punishment. Support should include trauma-informed therapeutic interventions, culturally competent practitioners, and access to advocacy services to ensure the child's voice is heard. Multi-agency collaboration is essential to provide holistic care—linking social care, health, education and community resources. Where SEND is present, safeguarding plans must integrate specialist educational and psychological support to address both the abuse and the child's developmental needs.



# Further Reading

Hydrant Programme and NAPAC, 2025, 'Investigating and responding to ritualistic abuse including witchcraft and spirit possession. Available at <https://www.hydrantprogramme.co.uk/assets/NPCC-Operational-Briefing-Investigating-and-responding-to-ritualistic-abuse-including-witchcraft-and-spirit-possession-July-2025-v4.pdf>

Hanson, E. 2025, 'Organised ritual abuse and its wider context: Degradation, deception, and disavowal. Available at <https://www.hydrantprogramme.co.uk/assets/Hanson-2025-Organised-ritual-abuse-and-its-wider-context.-Hydrant-NPCC-NAPAC.pdf>

“Of additional concern, and borne out in Billy’s case, is that a stigmatised child with a learning disability may be at greater risk of being subject to physical abuse (beating), emotional abuse (isolation) and serious neglect. The alternative [traditional] treatment that Billy received comprised ‘deliverance’ (c.f. exorcism) and a treatment called ‘hijama’ (wet cupping). These faith-based treatments were described by Billy’s sibling as being frightening and confusing for Billy (and for the other children).

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Bilal, 2019



# Appendix one

## 1. Search Criteria

The National Collection of Case Reviews has over 2,000 case reviews (<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/case-reviews>) from across the UK dating back to 1945, and thematic analysis reports from all four nations. In conducting the search, the following key terms were utilised against the abstracts of the reviews and keywords published. The following reviews were identified:

Term	Returns	Returns Relevant	Case Review
<b>Bible</b>	0		
<b>Cult</b>	0		
<b>Demonic</b>	0		
<b>Djinn</b>	0		
<b>Exorcism</b>	1		
<b>Juju</b>	0		
<b>Magic</b>	0		
<b>Muti</b>	0		
<b>Religious</b>	20	4	YS, Csyur 6/2018, Anita B, Serious Case Review F
<b>Satan</b>	0		
<b>Scripture</b>	0		
<b>Spell</b>	0		
<b>Spirit Possession</b>	2	2	Serious Case Review Bilal, Anita B
<b>Spiritual</b>	3	3	Csyur 06/2018, Child H Overview, Baby F
<b>Voodoo</b>	0		
<b>Witchcraft</b>	5	5	Serious Case Review Bilal, Anita B, Overview Report Child F, Case No. 14, Victoria Climbié Enquiry

With regard to filtering for 'religious' returns, cases were excluded where the findings were generic, and learning identified related to holistic approaches and assessments for families who are engaged within religious communities, practice and sensitivity to religious identities, absence of enquiry into diverse cultural and religious groups, and lack of curiosity into religious backgrounds.



## 2. Search Results

The following nine reviews were identified:

Title	Child Safeguarding Practice Review: Child YS
LSCB	Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership and Dudley Safeguarding People Partnership
Publication	2021
Search Criteria	Religious
Key Aspect	Reference to Witchcraft and Voodoo practices.

Title	Concise Child Practice Review Report CYSUR 6/2016
LSCB	Mid and West Wales Safeguarding Children Board
Publication	2020
Search Criteria	Religious, Spiritual
Key Aspect	Use of religious beliefs to exploit, abuse, and harm. Use of domination and coercion.

Title	Serious Case Review Anita B
LSCB	Hounslow Local Safeguarding Children Board
Publication	2016
Search Criteria	Religious, Spirit Possession, Witchcraft
Key Aspect	Witchcraft and spirit possession. Death linked to exorcism.



Title	Serious Case Review F
LSCB	Cambridgeshire Local Safeguarding Board
Publication	2010
Search Criteria	Religious
Key Aspect	Concerns over extreme religious beliefs leading to isolation and refusal of support reviews

Title	Serious Case Review Bilal
LSCB	Unnamed
Publication	2019
Search Criteria	Spirit possession
Key Aspect	Spirit possession caused autism. Neglect, physical and emotional abuse.

Title	Child H Overview
LSCB	Nottingham City Safeguarding Children Board
Publication	2015
Search Criteria	Spiritual
Key Aspect	Parents identification as spiritual teachers not explored

Title	Serious Case Review: Baby F: DOB. 01/12/12. DOD. 14/06/12
LSCB	Bexley Safeguarding Children Board
Publication	2014
Search Criteria	Spiritual
Key Aspect	Assumed parents spiritual belief informed refusal of treatment



<b>Title</b>	<b>Case No. 14</b>
<b>LSCB</b>	Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board
<b>Publication</b>	2010
<b>Search Criteria</b>	Witchcraft
<b>Key Aspect</b>	Evil spirits inhabited the child

<b>Title</b>	<b>Victoria Climbié Inquiry</b>
<b>LSCB</b>	National
<b>Publication</b>	2003
<b>Search Criteria</b>	Witchcraft
<b>Key Aspect</b>	Evil spirits and witchcraft



# Notes

