

**AFRUCA – Africans Unite Against Child Abuse**  
Promoting the Rights and Welfare of Black/African Children

# WHAT IS WITCHCRAFT ABUSE?

Safeguarding African Children in the UK Series 5  
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition



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# 1 About AFRUCA

**Africans Unite against Child Abuse (AFRUCA) was established in May 2001 as a platform for advocating for the rights and welfare of African children following the deaths of some newly arrived children in the UK. It became a Company Limited by Guarantee in October 2001 and a registered Charity in July 2002 with a Board of Directors appointed to run the organization.**

AFRUCA is embedded in and has developed out of African communities in the UK as a response to their realization of the problems African children and parents face and the gaps that exist within the child protection system for African children in the country. The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of The Child and the UK Children's Acts of 1989, 2004 and 2014 provide the foundation for all our work at AFRUCA. We aim to promote the best interests of the child in all our activities. Our stance is that culture and religion should never be a reason to abuse children.

## **Our work includes:**

AFRUCA works in many ways to help promote the rights and welfare of African children and families. Our main areas of work are:

**Awareness raising and sensitisation:** Within African communities and among young Africans about children's rights as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international conventions and UK legislation promoting the rights and welfare of children.

**Information, education, and advisory services:** To raise the profile of African children in the UK, increase awareness of their needs, improve policies and practices, and develop the leadership potential of young Africans. Activities include research and publishing reports; media work; conferences, seminars, workshops, and training programmes for parents, policy makers, service providers, faith and community leaders, young people; community meetings; advice and consultancy services.

**Advocacy and policy development:** Working closely with policy makers to shape the development of policy and regulatory action to promote the welfare of children and families.

**Community and international development:** In partnership with others to put in place programmes and projects to help relieve the suffering and hardship that African children and their families experience.

**Support for Children, Young People and Families:** Provision of practical and therapeutic support to children, young people and families in crisis or at the point of breakdown through effective early intervention services. Our therapeutic service provides a confidential space to explore thoughts, feelings, beliefs and experiences through one-to-one, psycho-educational groups or group therapy, to those who have been affected by abuse, trafficking or FGM.

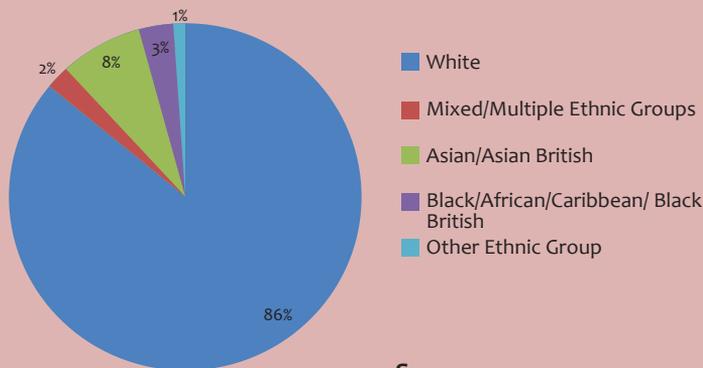
**For further information about our work, please visit our website at [www.afruca.org](http://www.afruca.org)**

## 2 Africans in the UK

The UK, through its historical links with a number of English speaking African countries, and also due to its reputation as the most multicultural country in Europe, has become home to many African people.

The 2011 UK census indicated that there are over 1.8 million Africans in the UK, an increase of 1.1 million from the 2001 census making up 3.3% of the overall UK population.

### Ethnic groups, London and Wales 2011



**Source:**

*Office for National Statistics (2013)*

Africans are generally well integrated into the British society and are economically and academically driven, making vast contributions within the health and social care system and in business. Children from African backgrounds are achieving particularly well above other groups within the British education system, and continue to thrive.

### Social Issues affecting Africans in the UK

Africans like many other immigrant groups in the UK tend to migrate with their values, beliefs and work ethos. While we acknowledge some cultural practices, beliefs and values are beneficial, others are particularly harmful to certain sections of the community such as to children and women. Increasingly, Local Authorities across the country are reporting a rise in cases of African families coming to the attention of Children's Services mainly due to differences in approaches to child rearing, physical discipline and religious or cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and witchcraft branding.

These are practices seen as normal by many Africans but could be considered as posing significant harm to children according to UK laws. Moreover, many African

parents, faith and community leaders themselves are unaware of the UK laws and practices that safeguard children. As a result, many African children are being removed from their families and placed into the care system, leading to more African families being broken up, with significant psychological impact.

There are high levels of unemployment as new arrivals face difficulties in accessing jobs that match their qualifications or experience. African communities, particularly new immigrants also find themselves without decent housing and a high proportion of Africans live on the poorest and most neglected estates in the UK's largest cities. Finally, many Africans have difficulty accessing social and health care, some due to their immigration status, but also, sometimes, because they are unaware of the local support services available to them. Children can also be exposed to some form of emotional abuse because of the level of stress and reality of life experienced by their parents or others looking after them.

AFRUCA has produced the **“Safeguarding African Children in the UK”** series of publications to highlight different safeguarding issues and to assist members of the African community in the UK to know more about different forms of child abuse and how to identify the signs so children can be safe and be better protected. The **“What is Witchcraft Abuse?”** booklet is the seventh in the series.



### 3 What is Witchcraft?

Witchcraft means different things to different people. However, for the purpose of this publication, it is simply “the invocation of alleged supernatural powers to control people or events, using sorcery or magic”.

In many African traditional beliefs, such powers are said to be given by “spiritual” entities. The agent or medium of the powers is called a witch. The powers are usually malevolent, associated with an intention to do evil to others. However in other cases, these powers are said to be benevolent, bestowing health and material benefits.

Witchcraft is described by some as the belief in the existence of a dark world inhabited by bad beings who are in a constant interaction with the living in the physical world where humans live. It is said that these beings have the powers to override human wills and wishes, and can manifest their powers through human agents. In many parts of Africa and indeed other parts of the world, people believe that these beings roam around seeking someone to possess for evil deeds. They entice their victims in different ways, for example through giving them edible substances like food where the evil spirit can be passed on to the victims. In other instances, certain individuals are said to seek out such powers in order to perpetrate evil. In all these cases, those possessed of these evil powers are called witches. Those who are victims, enticed in different ways to take on these powers are believed to act unconsciously, unaware of the evil they cause. Many children branded as witches are seen to fall under this category.

Witches bear different names in different parts of Africa. In the Congo, they are Ndoki. In parts of Tanzania they are called the evil eye or “djinn”. In Nigeria, among the Yoruba, they are “Aje”. In Igboland they are called “Ogbanjé” or “Amozu”. In Rwanda, they are known as “Abazimu” and in Uganda they are called “Emandwa”.

Many Christians believe in spirit possession but make a distinction between possession by the Holy Spirit and possession by evil spirits. Witchcraft is considered to be the work of the devil. The manifestation of spiritual utterances and the power to cast out evil spirits, including witchcraft spirits, are seen as supreme forms of religious experiences in Christianity.

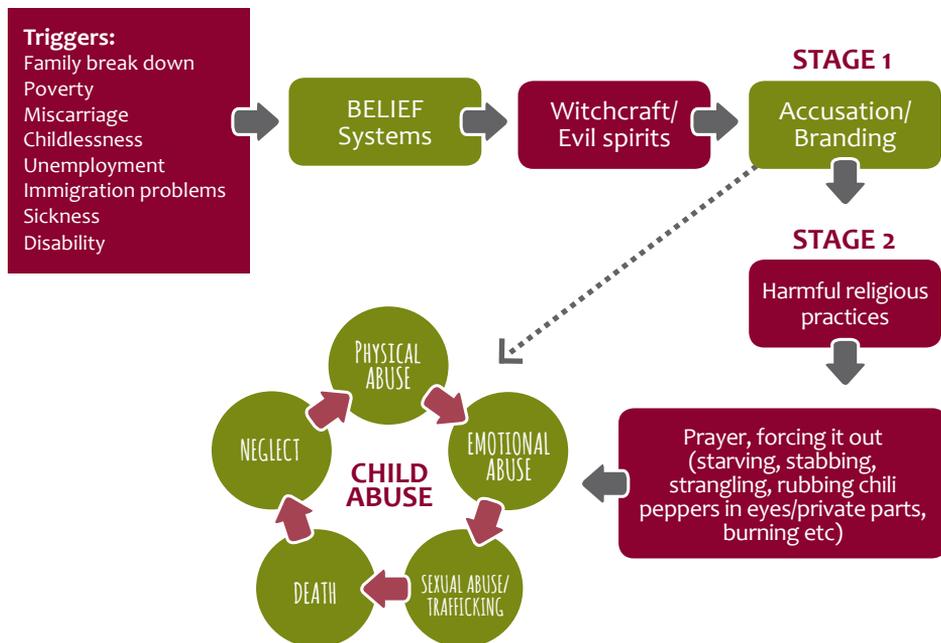
Islam also recognises the existence of evil spirits called jinns that can take control of human beings. Islam explicitly forbids the practice of witchcraft (Sihr). For example, Islam recognises that evil spirits are able to affect people’s lives by causing physical ailments.

## 4 What is Witchcraft Abuse?

Historical evidence shows that mankind, from prehistoric times, has had belief in super-natural entities and powers. The underlying motive has been the quest for man to find answers to unexplained phenomenon and problems including evil in the world, the meaning of human existence and what happens when one dies. Many new communities in the UK today face so many social and economic problems that create a fertile ground for the belief in the influence of evil spirits to flourish. These include poverty and deprivation, unemployment, lack of success, immigration problems, housing problems, family breakdown, ill health, and many others.

These “triggers” lead to children being scapegoated as the sources of these problems leading to them being labelled as witches. The labelling of children as witches is a huge form of emotional abuse in itself and cannot be ignored. Subsequent to that, such children are subjected to many other forms of abuses and harm to punish them for their evil deeds, but also in efforts to exorcise them from the evil spirits ‘possessing’ them. Due to the seriousness of the abuse and harm children branded as witches experience and the long term damage this causes to their overall well-being, we have termed this phenomenon: “Witchcraft Abuse”.

**Figure One: Stages of Witchcraft Abuse**



## 5 Why Are Children Branded as Witches or as Possessed?

In the past, in many African and other communities, witchcraft was always associated with old men and women. Thus in reality, branding children as witches is a recent development among African communities. It seems to be quite contrary to the values that Africans attach to children. Many attribute this new phenomenon to poverty, a breakdown of family and extended family structures – for example as a result of conflict and war, a dereliction of responsibility to protect the vulnerable by communities and institutions. Now, where ritual killings take place, children are selected on the assumption that they are innocent and therefore represent a perfect sacrifice.

### Children at Risk of Witchcraft Abuse

There is no apparent way of determining what kind of children would be at risk of Witchcraft Abuse. However, in the past, the following groups of children are known to have been accused of being witches and have experienced untold abuse and harm as a result:

#### Box One: Children At Risk of Witchcraft Abuse

- Children with disability including autism, epilepsy, downs syndrome and dyslexia
- Children living away from home in private fostering situations as well as in domestic servitude situations
- Children living with a relative or a step parent, with one of the natural parents absent or dead
- Children whose parents have been branded as witches
- Children who are “naughty”, rude or have challenging behaviour or involved in delinquent activity
- Children struggling with their sexual identity
- Children with learning disabilities or mental health problems
- Left handed children
- Children who are geniuses or exceptionally bright
- Children living in broken families

## 6 Religion and Witchcraft Abuse

New communities bring with them a deep rooted religious culture. When they arrive in the United Kingdom they are faced with many problems ranging from a clash of cultures to immigration issues, unemployment, family problems, dealing with past traumatic experiences and depression. Under the circumstances, religious values and beliefs become the obvious coping mechanisms. Indeed the Church or Mosque become places of refuge and support for many people. This is the place where they get emotional support, information and advice on life in the UK.

Faith leaders are the most trusted people in the community and therefore enjoy powers that can easily be abused. Misuse of power is facilitated by the absence of proper mechanisms of accountability, lack of a regulatory framework to guide the activities of faith leaders and enough grasp of the knowledge of the laws and regulations in the country relating to safeguarding children. People are likely to believe their pastors, imams or priests if told that their children are witches or are possessed.

Also in many instances, the exorcism or deliverance carried out on a child accused of being a witch or as possessed comes at a price. Parents of children accused of being witches must pay a fee to have their children delivered. Many people believe the economic benefit derived from exorcising children branded as witches could be an incentive for fraudulent pastors and a plausible reason for the rise in the number of children who are so branded.

### Box Two: What Does It Mean To Be Branded As A Witch?

Branding a child as a witch is a terrible form of emotional abuse. In some communities; calling someone a witch is accusing him/her of being a source of evil and all misfortunes including death.

1. It is an attack on the personal integrity of the child
2. It is stripping the child of his/her innocence and considering the child as a perpetrator of evil acts, a criminal
3. It is dehumanising the child because the child is excluded from moral consideration once labelled as the worst criminal
4. The accusation instils fear and provides a moral ground for others to ill-treat a child.
5. It is an incitement to hatred and harm
6. Branding a child as a witch is emotional abuse

Branding a child as a witch, even without any form of physical abuse, is a very damaging religious practice. For this reason, AFRUCA has been running a campaign in the UK to make it illegal to brand children witches. You can read more about our campaign on our website at [www.afruca.org](http://www.afruca.org)

## 7 How are child victims of Witchcraft Branding abused?

Branding a child as a witch is a serious form of emotional abuse. However, once this branding or labelling occurs, a catalogue of other abusive actions follows in response to what people believe is a way of dealing with evil. The form of abuse experienced is usually two-fold:

### 1. Within Families and in the community

**This involves:**

- The subsequent psychological and **emotional abuse** experienced in the form of verbal abuse, curses, and the knowledge by the child that he or she is hated by everyone because she is a witch. The self-torture that accompanies the belief that one is a witch responsible for wicked acts on people can be very damaging.
- **Physical abuse:** To beat the devil out, but also to punish. Many children accused of witchcraft experience severe physical abuse including beating with heavy implements, stamping on stomachs, kicking, punching, and starving in the form of fasting which can go on for days on end.
- **Neglect:** The child can be isolation and ostracised from other members of the family and friends. They are not cared for and are denied any form of attention, including medical attention. Sometimes children miss education or are not able to concentrate at school because of the abuses highlighted above.
- **Sexual Abuse:** In some cases, the isolation makes victims prone to additional sexual abuse in the hands of opportunists within the family or outside, since no one cares what happens to them.

### 2. Within Faith Organisations

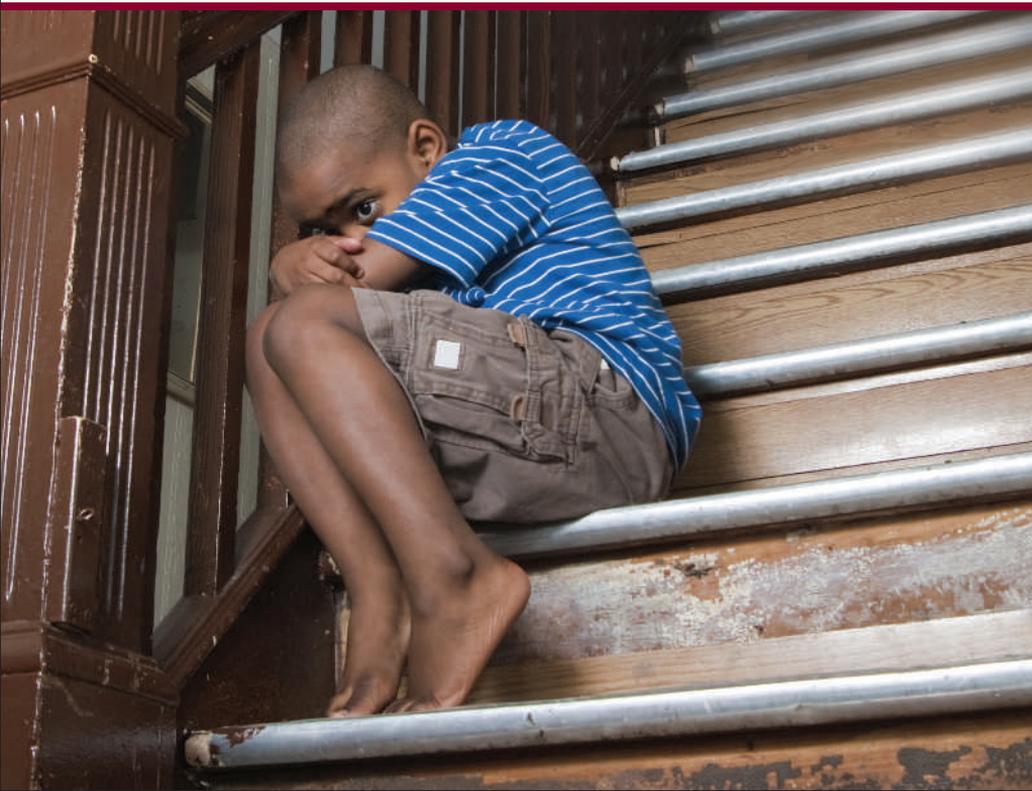
In many instances, the accusation of witchcraft is usually followed by what is known as a 'deliverance' or exorcism. At AFRUCA we have come across cases of deliverance sessions held for children which can be physically and emotionally harmful to children. These include:

- Shouting over a child while praying for him or her in a group which can cause a lot of emotional trauma
- Long prayers (vigil prayers) that do not give a child enough time to rest and sleep thus having a negative impact on his/her health and the ability to concentrate on their studies at home and in school
- Traumatizing a child with threats of hell if they do not repent from their witchcraft or evil deed.
- Forcing a child to fast for many days with no water and food in order to "get the witchcraft out".

## 8 What are the signs of Witchcraft Abuse?

In many instances, many of the indicators that can alert other people to the fact that a child is being abused because he or she is believed to be a witch are no different from other signs of abuse. While some of the signs below might not in themselves be indicators of witchcraft abuse, taken together, they should arouse suspicion and induce further inquiry:

- Unexplained bruises or marks on the body
- Incision marks on the body
- Says he or she will go to hell or is a bad person
- Is ostracised in the home or by other children from the same community
- Does not go to school or does not go to school regularly
- Has limited freedom of movement
- Is malnourished or steals food
- Claims to be fasting for many days at a time
- Is not taken to hospital when ill
- Looks unkempt and uncared for
- Looks sad, miserable and lonely
- Does not have any friends or is ignored by other children



## 9 What are the effects of Witchcraft Abuse?

In addition to the forms of abuse identified above, child witchcraft branding can have a number of very terrible consequences for the children involved.

### • Child Abandonment and Neglect

Many children who are branded as witches are ejected from the family home. With no one to look after them, they end up living on the streets where they are vulnerable to all forms of harm, crime and criminality. According to a report by Save the Children on Child Witches in the Congo, about 80% of the children living rough on the streets of Kinshasa are said to be child witches thrown out by their families.

### • Witchcraft Abuse and Child Trafficking

Children who are banished from the family home in the false belief that they are witches are very vulnerable to all forms of harm and exploitation while on the streets. At an international conference on witchcraft branding held by AFRUCA in 2011, the link between child trafficking and witchcraft was clearly established. Many children in Malawi who have been disowned because they are seen to be witches are easily preyed upon by child traffickers who exploit their vulnerability for material gain. Such children are trafficked for a variety of purposes including sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude and so on.

### • Missed Education

In many African countries children thrown out of the home with no access to support and assistance also miss out on education. As child witches they are not able to attend school because of their status. Lack of education reduces their life chances which lead to a life of poverty and deprivation as adults.

### • Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Children abandoned and ostracised by family and friends, especially girls, are very prone to being sexually abused and exploited. As homeless children, they have little or no protection against sexual assault and rape neither do they have any recourse to justice if abuse does occur. Homeless children in many African countries are seen as pests, they have little or no status in society and are considered a liability. Child victims of witchcraft abuse therefore suffer in many ways as victims of abuse.

### • Long Term Mental Health and Trauma

Many victims suffer untold mental health problems as a result of their experiences of abuse. The rejection by friends and family can lead to serious emotional problems including depression, self-hatred, lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem.

## 10 Witchcraft Abuse in the UK

There is limited knowledge about the scale and prevalence of witchcraft abuse in the UK. A research project commissioned by the Department for Children, Education and Schools, carried out by Eleanor Stobart published in 2006 reviewed 74 cases of child abuse which could be related to accusation of spirit possession and witchcraft, between 2000 and 2005. There were 38 cases with clear-cut evidence of witchcraft abuse. However, based on our experiences of working with different agencies on cases of children branded as witches, we are of the opinion that the numbers identified in the research are underestimated. This underestimate could be due to the poor recording of cases and most especially because social workers and the Police are not properly trained and are not aware of the indicators of witchcraft abuse and hence might not handle or record cases as such.

The London Metropolitan Police figures for 2003-2015 showed 189 cases of faith based abuse. For the period 1st April 2014 to 31 March 2015, it recorded 60 allegations of faith based abuse. AFRUCA believes that if the other 42 Police Constabularies in England and Wales apart from London properly record cases of witchcraft abuse within their regions, and the cases that have been reported directly to charities like AFRUCA, the NSPCC are collated we would have in excess of over 300 or 400 cases. (<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/hundreds-children-abused-being-possessed-9260792>)

There have been many well publicised cases of witchcraft abuse in the UK. The case of Victoria Climbié, the Ivorian girl tortured to death for being a witch was a case in point. In addition, we have had the case of “Child B” in Hackney who was tortured by her Angolan relatives because they believed she was a witch. In Bradford, a Nigerian pastor was jailed for inflicting physical harm on his children because he believed they were possessed. A Congolese pastor was jailed in Bedfordshire for abusing his two children because he believed they were witches. In 2010, a young Congolese-French boy Kristy Bamu was tortured to death in Newham in the belief that he was a witch.

As a result of the highly negative media interest, it is possible that exorcist rites have been pushed underground. There are anecdotal reports that exorcism ceremonies over children are carried out in some private rooms in some churches and in homes away from the public eye.

## 11 Protecting Children against Witchcraft Abuse: What to do?

Child protection is the responsibility of every member of the community in their different capacities and roles:

### **As a an individual member of the community**

- Maintain and promote African values that protect children, educate them and make them the collective responsibility of the community
- If you go to church or mosque, make sure your faith leaders have been trained in child safeguarding and that your place of worship has a Child Protection Policy. It is essential that faith leaders adhere to spiritual principles that protect children and that they are transparent and accountable. Members of the congregation must ensure faith leaders perform their roles of safeguarding children in their places of worship.
- Be vigilant to detect the signs of a child accused of being a witch
- Make sure you know how to report cases of all forms of child abuse that come to your attention

### **As a Community organisation**

- Raise awareness of the negative consequences of child abuse in the community
- Ensure you have a comprehensive Child Protection Policy if your work involves contact with children and that all workers in the organisation have been trained in child protection
- Engage with faith and community leaders, in a spirit of dialogue and complementarity, to ensure that places where community members gather including places of worship are equipped to meet the requirements of keeping the children safe from all types of harm.
- Be an independent and honest broker between faith leaders and the community

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## As a faith organisation

- Have a Child Safeguarding Policy and Procedures in place
- Put in place regular quality assurance and monitoring systems to ensure that the policy is followed through
- Make sure that the person who has overall responsibility for the Mosque, Church, staff and volunteers working with children has had training in child protection.
- Have a system of accountability for the safeguarding of children when they are within Mosque or Church premises and during family pastoral visits
- Make sure that all the staff and volunteers working with children are all DBS checked
- Have reporting procedures for cases of concern that may be reported by members.
- Organise child protection and positive parenting training courses such as those delivered by AFRUCA Children's Champions for members of your congregation.
- Train staff or volunteers that work with children so that they are familiar with government requirements and guidance in the area of safeguarding children
- Encourage regular visits by social workers to your organisation to exchange information and experience on safeguarding children
- Get registered with the local authority
- Help to denounce fake pastors that would want to exploit the desperate conditions of the poor to attract big congregations by promising miracles

## As a parent

- Learn about the developmental needs of children. You can read more about this in AFRUCA's Manual on Child Protection for African Parents available on our website.
- Work closely with the school to detect behaviour that might indicate normal learning difficulties and other natural impairment like autism so you can get special support from the school or the state
- Approach professionals in case you have concerns about your child's behaviour and health
- Learn to improve your knowledge of what constitutes child abuse and improve your parenting skills by attending one of AFRUCA's free workshops on child protection. Please contact us for details.

## 12 Reporting cases of child abuse

It is the duty of every local authority to promote and safeguard the welfare of all children living in their area. If you suspect a child is at risk of abuse or is experiencing abuse, you should:

- In the first instance contact your local authority children's services department. You can reach them by calling the Local Authority switchboard number which is on your Council Tax bill.
- When you are put through to Children's Services, state that you want to make a Child Abuse "referral". This simply means you want to report a case of child abuse.
- You will be asked to provide further details about the case you are reporting. Please note that you do not have to provide your personal details.
- The local authority is obliged to make an investigation. If you do not see any changes in the case you have reported. Please follow up with another phone call.
- You can also call the police on 999 to report a case of child abuse.
- If nothing happens, you can contact AFRUCA and we will pursue the case until action is taken. Our contact details are at the back of this publication.

## 13 AFRUCA: Our Work to Protect Children from Witchcraft Abuse

AFRUCA is convinced that the Black / African community is best placed to find solutions to problems experienced by its members and help meet the needs of its children. At the same time we know that parents are best placed to make the most positive impact in promoting the well-being of their children. For this reason, we have established different projects to support Black and African children, parents, faith organisations as well as practitioners and policymakers who work with children in England.

### 1. Working with parents:

AFRUCA works with Black and African parents across England to overcome the problems they face promoting the welfare of their children through the following activities:

- Our Child Protection and Positive Parenting workshops delivered by staff and our volunteer Children's Champions across England help parents gain a basic knowledge of child protection, safeguarding and alternative parenting styles.
- Working with parents who have children in the care system or have a child protection plan to ensure they can get the best outcome for their children
- Production and dissemination of information that deal with different aspects of safeguarding children so that they know how to protect children from harm

### 2. Working with Faith Organisations:

AFRUCA works with different faith organisations as part of its work on child abuse prevention by:

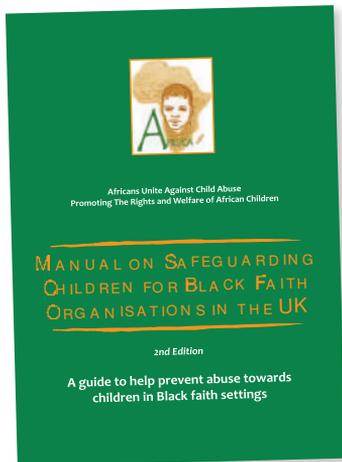
- Running child protection and safeguarding training for faith workers and leaders to equip them with the knowledge of key safeguarding rules and regulations and how to ensure that practices within their place of worship are conducive in protecting children.
- Working with faith organisations to develop and implement their Safeguarding Policies and Procedures as well as encouraging them to appoint a Safeguarding Officer and for them to adopt safer recruitment procedures by ensuring that staff working directly with children undertake DBS checks.

### 3. Influencing policy and practice on safeguarding Black and African children:

- Ongoing campaign for a change in legislation to make it illegal to brand children as witches.

### 4. Engaging policy makers and Influencing practice by:

- Organising workshops and conferences for policy makers and practitioners to ensure continued sharing of information on safeguarding Black and African children.
- Practitioner training for frontline staff to improve their confidence and capacity to intervene in families where there are concerns of child protection issues based on beliefs.
- Providing advice, training and consultancy to statutory and other charitable voluntary organisations working with Black and African children affected by or at risk of faith related abuse.



## AFRUCA MANUAL ON CHILD SAFEGUARDING FOR FAITH ORGANISATIONS

This is a very useful manual for all faith organisations, as it explores key safeguarding issues relating to places of worship especially looking at harmful practices affecting children and vulnerable people. It explains the legal and policy frameworks safeguarding children in the UK and the importance of faith organisations having a safeguarding policy and if possible a trained safeguarding officer. It explores how to implement and evaluate safeguarding policies, understand the child abuse referral process and how to report an abuse.

### Other publications in this Series

1. What is Child Abuse?
2. What is Child Trafficking?
3. What is Private Fostering?
4. What is Female Genital Mutilation?
5. What is Witchcraft Abuse?
6. What is Physical Abuse?
7. What is Sexual Abuse?
8. What is Emotional Abuse?
9. What is Child Neglect?

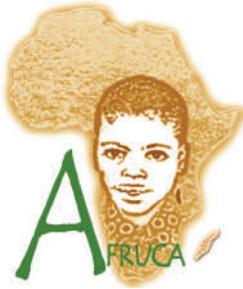
### AFRUCA publications children and young person's version

1. What is FGM?
2. What is Child Abuse?
3. What is Child Trafficking?

Our safeguarding African Children in the UK series of publications are produced to help raise awareness among the UK African community about different forms of child abuse and what they can do to help address these.

These publications can be downloaded free on our website at [www.afruca.org](http://www.afruca.org)





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**Website:** [www.afruca.org](http://www.afruca.org)

### **Our Safeguarding African Children in the UK Series of publications include:**

1. What is Child Abuse?
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