



Africans Unite Against Child Abuse

Promoting the Rights and Welfare of African Children

WHAT IS WITCHCRAFT ABUSE?

Safeguarding African Children in the UK Series **5**



WHAT IS WITCHCRAFT ABUSE?



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	Page	
1	About AFRUCA	4
2	Introduction: Africans in the UK	5
3	What is Witchcraft?	7
4	What is Witchcraft Abuse?	8
5	Why Are Children Branded as Witches or As Possessed?	9
6	Religion, Witchcraft and Spirit Possession	10
7	Exorcism and Deliverance	11
8	Religious Leaders and Witchcraft Abuse	12
9	How Are Victims of Witchcraft Branding Abused?	13
10	What Are the Signs of Witchcraft Abuse?	14
11	What Are the Effects of Witchcraft Abuse	14
12	How Wide-spread is the Belief in Witchcraft?	16
13	Witchcraft Abuse in the UK	17
14	Protecting Children from Witchcraft Abuse: What to do?	18
15	AFRUCA: Our Work to Protect Children from Witchcraft Abuse	19

1 About AFRUCA



AFRUCA- Africans Unite Against Child Abuse was established in May 2001 to promote the rights and welfare of African Children in the UK. We also work in partnership with other organisations in Africa and across Europe.

With offices in London and Manchester, AFRUCA works with UK practitioners working with children and in the African community to raise awareness and educate everyone about issues affecting the welfare of children so we can all act to protect them from abuse and harm. Our work includes:

- **Awareness Raising:** within the African community across the UK 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 and elsewhere, 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, community leaders, and young people; community meetings; advice and consultancy services.
- **Advocacy and Policy Development:** working closely with policy makers, especially within the framework of the Government’s “Every Child Matters agenda”, to shape the development of policy and regulatory action to promote the welfare of children.
- **Community and International Development:** in partnership with others, establishing programmes and projects to help relieve some of the suffering and hardship that African children experience.
- **Service Provision:** supporting African parents and working with families in crisis at the point of breakdown and disintegration.

For further information about our work, please visit our website at www.afruca.org

2 Introduction: Africans in the UK



According to the 2001 census, there are over 587,000 Africans in the UK. This figure is way underrepresented since it excludes a number of groups, for example those who are resident in the UK illegally, or who are homeless and therefore unregistered. Of this figure, 78% of Africans live in London. Africans are the fastest growing ethnic minority in the UK, overtaking African Caribbeans and other groups.

This rapid increase in population brings correlating social problems with significant implications for the children in the communities. As with most migrant groups, social exclusion and poverty are rife among newly arrived African communities. There is a high level of unemployment, because new arrivals tend to find it difficult to access good quality well paid jobs, despite Africans having one of the highest levels of educational qualifications as an ethnic group. Also, as many new migrants lack access to decent housing; a high proportion of Africans live in the poorest urban areas, on neglected and deprived council estates, in Britain's largest cities, including London, Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester. In addition to this, Africans have the lowest rate of home ownership in the country. The combination of all these problems often results in an increase in health problems, which includes high blood pressure and a range of mental problems. To compound this, access to the health and social care is also poor, partly because many people cannot access state care due to immigration status. In some communities, substance abuse is becoming quite rampant, with a high proportion of the adult male population at risk.

Furthermore, lack of stability and uncertainty about immigration status and general dire living conditions put pressure on many families leading to problems including domestic violence. This in turn is putting more children at risk as victims of abuse.

As Immigration does not happen in a vacuum, people tend to take their practices, beliefs, customs and cultures with them when they migrate. Increasingly Local Authorities across the country are reporting cases of African families coming to the attention of Children's Services mainly due to different child rearing practices which conflict with the laws of the land. Many African children are being removed from their families because they are seen as being at risk of significant harm. Cultural practices like female genital mutilation, the use of children as domestic servants as well as witchcraft branding are seen as putting children at risk of abuse. For that reason, more children are being lost to the care system, leading to more African families being broken up and fragmented.





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 that children can be safe and be better protected. The “What is Witchcraft Abuse?” publication is one in the series.

This booklet does not intend, in any way or form, to discredit or undermine the moral values that religion provides to people and the excellent work done by many religious organisations that cater for the spiritual needs of members of our community, nor does it attempt to undermine some of our African values. It aims to highlight harmful behaviour and practices that impact negatively on our children. It invites everybody in our community to work together to ensure that our children are protected from harm at all times and that our places of worship are sanctuaries for all our children.



3 What is Witchcraft?



Witchcraft means different things to different people. However, for the purpose of this publication, we will rely on the definition in Encyclopaedia Britannica which defines it as “the exercise or invocation of alleged supernatural powers to control people or events, typically involving 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 based on the belief in the existence of a dark world inhabited by innate 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”.

4 What is Witchcraft Abuse?



Historical evidence shows that mankind, from prehistoric times, has had belief in supernatural 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, barrenness and many others. In many instances, the sources of these problems are attributed to children branded as witches. Such children are subjected to many forms of abuse 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".



5 Why Are Children Branded as Witches or as Possessed?



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, 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.

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:

- 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 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 with learning disabilities or mental health problems
- Left handed children
- Children who are geniuses or exceptionally bright
- Children living in broken families

6 Religion, Witchcraft and Spirit Possession



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 experience in Christianity.

There are passages in the Bible that link physical ailments to demon possession such as inability to speak, epilepsy, blindness, supernatural strength and demeaning behaviour.

An example is as follows:

“As they went out, behold, they brought to Him a man, mute and demon possessed. And when the demon was cast out, the mute spoke. And the multitudes marvelled, saying, “It was never seen like this in Israel” (Mathew 9:32-33 NKJV);

In many instances today, accusation of witchcraft is made by the Pastor who also professes solutions to this. This is usually in the form of deliverance or exorcism by the pastor or other high ranking members of the church. Accusations of witchcraft can lead to a series of abusive acts against children who are so branded.

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 evils spirits are able to affect people's lives by causing physical ailments.

“Ibn al-Qayyim, a famous 13th Century Sunni Islamic jurist, Commentator on the Quran and Philosopher, said:

“witchcraft can cause people to be sick or to feel depressed, or which makes them love or hate, exists and is well known to all people. Many people have experienced what it can do to them.” (Al-Tafseer al-Qayyim, p. 571)”

7 Exorcism and Deliverance



The Collins English Dictionary defines exorcism as “expelling, or attempting to expel, one or more evil spirits from a person or place believed to be possessed or haunted, by prayers, adjurations and religious rites”. Different religions have different rites or ceremonies to perform exorcism, known as deliverance in some religious denominations. Those who believe in the power of witchdoctors or diviners will usually consult them for exorcism. Different ceremonies and rites are carried out to rid the body of the evil spirit possessing it.

In Islam some of the ways advised in Saheeh Al-Haadeeth to remove the effects of witchcraft are prayers and supplications (Ruqyah). The best way that is advised to be protected from the evil spirits is *“to fear Allah, obey His commands, put one's trust in Him, and seek refuge with Allah”*.

(Culled from <http://islam-muslims.blogspot.com/2005/08/it-is-possible-for-witchcraft-to-come.html>).

Christians believe in exorcism. It is recorded in the Bible that Jesus drove out demons from people. “Jesus preached and cast out devils,” *Mark 1:39. “Jesus gave his twelve disciples the power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness, and all manner of disease.” (Matt. 10:1).*

In the early days of Christianity, the ability to cast out evil spirits was a sign of true discipleship among the apostles. The rites used have included prayers, laying of hands, commands and holy water. In Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, the experience is called “deliverance ministry” where appointed ministers drive out devils and heal while they touch the persons with their hands and pray over them. Many of the African led Churches belong to these Christian denominations.

In the UK today, there have been many known instances where child branding by certain churches and pastors has led to a catalogue of cruelty and abuse being perpetrated on children. Many of these cases have been reported in the media. Not only does the branding lead to child abuse, in other instances methods of deliverance or exorcism employed also involve practices that significantly harm children.



8 Religious Leaders and Witchcraft Abuse



New communities bring with them a deep rooted religious culture. When they arrive in the United Kingdom they are faced with a multiplicity of problems ranging from 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 Mosques 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. However, the belief in witchcraft is not confined to particular countries, cultures or religions or to recent migrants.

The Imams, pastors and priests are the most trusted people in the community and therefore enjoy power that can easily be abused. The risk of misuse of power is made possible in 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. The people are likely to believe their pastors, imams or priests if told that their children 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 many fraudulent pastors and a plausible reason for the rise in the number of children who are so branded.

Social and economic pressures facing new communities are overwhelming and can render people desperate and to look for any form of explanation and psychological relief, including resorting to fake faith leaders who are wont to take advantage of people's miseries for their own selfish purposes.

Without a common and transparent mechanism to ascertain that a child is possessed by evil spirits, many children in our community are left to the mercy of anyone who would claim to have the "gift of discernment" to brand him or her as a witch.



9 How Are Child Victims of Witchcraft Branding Abused?



Once a child has been branded as a witch, a catalogue of abusive actions follows in response to what people believe is a way of countering 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 accompanied 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, 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, since no one cares what happens to them.

2. Within Faith Organisations

In many instances, the accusation of witchcraft is made by the church (mainly the Pastor) who also professes solutions to this. This is usually in the form of deliverance or exorcism by the pastor or other high ranking members of the church.

Less dramatic but equally hindering children's well-being are the following practices which occur in attempts to exorcise or deliver the child:

- 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 play 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.

10 What Are the Signs 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
- 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

11 What Are the Effects of Witchcraft Abuse?

In addition to the forms of abuse identified above, child 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 ejected 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 a recent conference held by AFRUCA, 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**

As children abandoned and ostracised by family and friends, girls especially 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 and lack of self confidence and low self esteem.



12 How Wide-spread is the Belief in Witchcraft?



Most of the efforts to address Witchcraft Abuse in the UK have targeted specific communities, while ignoring the possibility that children from other backgrounds might be at risk. In actual fact, the belief in the existence of witchcraft and spirit possession among African communities is widespread even though many do not resort to it to solve their problems. An online survey was carried by the BBC in July 2005 on Africans' belief in the existence of witchcraft

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/africa/4705201.stm> (July 2005).

The results of the survey were quite revealing. More than 95 % of respondents, quite representative of all the regions of sub-Saharan Africa: Southern Africa (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, South Africa, Botswana) East Africa (Uganda, Kenya) Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea); West Africa (Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Togo, Ghana); Central Africa (Cameroon); and even Africans in the Diaspora spread across Europe, Australia, the USA and Canada - all said that they believe that witchcraft exists in Africa. It is quite significant that the respondents represent people of a certain category - educated individuals with access to a computer and a capacity and interest to engage online. Though the respondents say that they do not visit witchdoctors or diviners, almost all of them believe that witchcraft exists.



13 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 caseworkers might not be aware of the indicators of witchcraft abuse and hence might not handle or record cases as such.

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. Last year, in Bradford, a Nigerian pastor was jailed for inflicting physical harm on his children because he believed they were possessed. More recently, a Congolese pastor was jailed in Bedfordshire for abusing his two children because he believed they were witches.

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.



14 Protecting children against Witchcraft Abuse: What to do?



STEP NO 1

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 place of worship has a Child Protection Policy and that the leaders adhere to spiritual principles that protect children and that they are transparent and accountable.
- Be vigilant to detect the signs of a child accused of being a witch
- Make sure you know how to report cases of child abuse that come to your attention

As an 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
- 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.
- Support your community to denounce any form of abuse from any quarter
- Listen to the concerns of your community especially where it concerns allegations of child abuse
- Be an independent and honest broker between faith leaders and the community

As a faith organisation

- Have a Child Protection Policy 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 CRB checked
- Have reporting procedures for cases of concern that may be reported by members
- Encourage parents to learn about child protection and positive parenting
- 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
- 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
- If you attend church or mosque, learn more about your religion so you know what it says about different issues
- Know what constitutes child abuse and harm
- Get interested in improving your parenting skills



STEP NO. 2

Know how to contact relevant agencies for support and assistance.

To attend training courses in Child Protection for Parents, contact AFRUCA. Our contact details are at the back of this booklet

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 or in Yellow pages.
- 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.



AFRUCA is convinced that the 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 African parents, faith organisations as well as practitioners and policymakers who work with children in England.

1 Working with parents:

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

- Training courses for parents to equip them with a basic knowledge of child protection and related rules and regulations
- 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 has been working hard to engage faith organisations in its work on child abuse prevention by:

- Running child protection courses for faith workers to equip them with a good background knowledge of child protection rules and regulations and how to ensure that practices in their faith settings are conducive to children
- Working with faith organisations to develop and implement their Child Protection Policies and Procedures as well as signposting to other agencies to undertake CRB checks for their workers

3 Influencing policy and practice on safeguarding African children:

Harnessing the experience and knowledge within the African community by:

- Running a Safeguarding African Children Network to inform government policy and practice but also feed into the design and delivery of training for frontline staff.
- Enabling improved communication, relation and collaboration between statutory bodies and grass root community organisations through the Network

4 Engaging policy makers and Influencing practice by:

- Organising workshops and conferences for policy makers and with practitioners to enable continued sharing of information on safeguarding African children,
- Training 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 and consultancy to statutory and other charitable and voluntary organisations working with African children affected by or at risk of faith related abuse.



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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?

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.

AFRUCA wishes to acknowledge the contributions of our partners Development Support Agency for co-producing this booklet, and Youth Alive in the North of Ghana, for supplying some of the photographs used in this publication.

This publication can also be downloaded from our [website at www.afruca.org](http://www.afruca.org)



Africans Unite Against Child Abuse

Promoting the Rights and Welfare of African Children

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