

# SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

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## ● **Hidden harm: What schools need to know about Witchcraft, Spirit Possession and Ritualistic Abuse (WSPRA)**

A new Partnership Learning Review and guidance from the Hydrant Programme and national policing partners has highlighted growing concern about abuse linked to beliefs in witchcraft, spirit possession and ritualistic practices (WSPRA). While relatively rarely recorded in official crime data, professionals believe the issue is significantly under-identified and often misunderstood by services working with children.

For schools and safeguarding professionals, awareness is essential. Children may disclose concerns indirectly or display signs that can easily be misinterpreted if staff are unfamiliar with this form of abuse.

### 🔍 **What is WSPRA?**

WSPRA refers to situations where abuse, harm or exploitation is justified or carried out within the context of spiritual or supernatural beliefs. This may include accusations that a child is possessed, a witch, or involved in rituals believed to have supernatural significance. These situations can involve:

- **Physical abuse during so-called “deliverance” or exorcism practices**
- **Emotional abuse linked to accusations of witchcraft**
- **Neglect or isolation of children believed to be cursed**
- **Sexual abuse or exploitation within organised or ritualised contexts**

Importantly, professionals emphasise that faith and spiritual belief themselves are not harmful, abuse occurs when beliefs are used to justify coercion, violence or control.

### 📖 **Why this matters**

Evidence suggests a large gap between disclosures and recorded crimes. For example, survivor helpline data recorded over 1,300 calls mentioning organised or ritual abuse between 2016 and 2025, yet only a handful of crimes were formally recorded in police datasets.

This suggests the issue may be under-recognised by professionals, partly because disclosures can sound unusual or implausible.

### ⚠️ **Possible indicators for schools**

School staff may notice warning signs such as:

- **A child expressing fear of spirits, curses, or being “evil”**
- **Unexplained injuries linked to “spiritual cleansing” or punishment**
- **A child being isolated or scapegoated within the family**
- **Extreme fear of religious or spiritual punishment**
- **Sudden withdrawal, secrecy or fear about going home**
- **References to rituals, ceremonies or “deliverance” practices**

Children with additional needs, disabilities or differences may be particularly vulnerable to accusations of possession or witchcraft.

### 🗣️ **Listening and responding**

Professionals are urged to approach disclosures with curiosity and belief, recognising that trauma, fear and coercion can affect how children describe their experiences. Survivors often delay disclosure because they fear not being believed or retaliation within their family or community.

### 👉 **What schools should do**

Schools play a vital safeguarding role. Key actions include:

- **Maintain professional curiosity when children describe unusual beliefs or fears**
- **Record concerns clearly and follow safeguarding procedures**
- **Share information with the DSL and safeguarding partners promptly**
- **Avoid dismissing disclosures because they sound unusual or culturally unfamiliar**
- **Work with multi-agency partners to ensure children receive appropriate protection**

### 📖 **Read:**

<https://www.hydrantprogramme.co.uk/assets/WSPRA-Partnership-Learning-Review.pdf>

## 🌱 **Support matters: Why access to support after Child Sexual Abuse is critical**

New research from the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse (CSA Centre) highlights an urgent issue: while many children and families need specialist help after sexual abuse, support services are under significant pressure and often difficult to access. For schools, understanding the importance of timely support and the barriers families face is essential for effective safeguarding.

### 📊 **The scale of the challenge**

Child sexual abuse remains a significant safeguarding issue. Research suggests that at least **15%** of girls and **5%** of boys experience sexual abuse **before the age of 16**, yet many cases never come to the attention of statutory services.

At the same time, services supporting victims and survivors are struggling to keep up with demand. The CSA Centre found that:

- **Almost two-thirds of specialist services are struggling to maintain capacity.**
- **Three-quarters face funding uncertainty, affecting staffing and sustainability.**

- **Some services have closed, leaving thousands of victims and survivors reliant on each remaining service.**

This means children and families may face long waiting lists or limited support options when they seek help.

### 🗣️ **Why early support matters**

Child sexual abuse can have long-lasting effects on mental health, relationships, education and wellbeing if support is not available.

However, research consistently shows that compassionate and timely support can significantly reduce long-term harm. Survivors often emphasise the importance of receiving help when they are ready to disclose, rather than months later.

For children and families, access to trauma-informed services can support:

- **Emotional recovery and resilience**
- **Safety planning and safeguarding**
- **Healthy relationships and trust**
- **Improved educational engagement**

### 📖 **What this means for schools**

Schools are often one of the first places where concerns are noticed or disclosures occur. This puts education professionals in a key position to support children and families.

Schools should:

- **Ensure staff understand the importance of listening and responding sensitively to disclosures**
- **Work closely with the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) to coordinate referrals**
- **Signpost families to specialist support services where appropriate**
- **Recognise that parents and carers may also need support following a disclosure**
- **Maintain strong links with local safeguarding partners and therapeutic services**

### 📖 **Read:**

<https://www.csacentre.org.uk/research-resources/research-evidence/supporting-victims-survivors/support-matters/>

## 🏠 **Domestic abuse and the family courts: What schools need to know**

A recent House of Commons Library briefing highlights ongoing concerns about how domestic abuse is addressed within family court child-arrangements cases in England and Wales. While the issue sits within the legal system, it has important implications for schools, particularly where safeguarding concerns overlap with family court proceedings.

### 📖 **Why this matters for children**

Child arrangements orders are made by the family court to decide who a child lives with and how they spend time with parents or other family members after separation. Research suggests that between **60%** and **90%** of child arrangements cases involve allegations of domestic abuse, highlighting how frequently safety concerns arise in disputes about contact and residence. For schools, this means many children affected by domestic abuse may also be experiencing stress linked to court proceedings, contact arrangements or family conflict.

### 📖 **What this means for schools**

Schools often become aware of family court proceedings through safeguarding records, parental discussions or multi-agency meetings. Staff should remember that:

- **Children involved in family court disputes may experience significant emotional stress and anxiety**
- **Domestic abuse may continue after separation through legal processes or contact disputes**
- **Schools should record concerns carefully and share safeguarding information with relevant professionals where appropriate**
- **Children may need additional emotional support and stability while court proceedings are ongoing**

### 📖 **Read:**

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8764/>

## 📖 **Spring term 2 - 5-minute ‘bitesize’ and audio version safeguarding refresher videos**

**Child abduction and community safety incidents - Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> March**

**Faith based abuse - Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> March**

## 📖 **Summer term 1 - 5-minute ‘bitesize’ and audio version safeguarding refresher videos**

**Forced marriage - Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> April**

**Private fostering - Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> April**

**Homelessness - Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> May**

**Sexism and sexual harassment - Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> May**

**Identifying young carers in school - Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> May**

To make the most of your brief all-staff safeguarding slot, you may wish to use one of my short ‘bite-size’ safeguarding videos or audio recordings, alongside a discussion-prompt slide. This approach helps keep safeguarding firmly in focus during those valuable five minutes at the start of your staff briefing.

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