



A1 HIDDEN ISSUES – INFORMATION FOR FACILITATORS

Revealing the harm caused by witchcraft accusations against children: information for facilitators

Tools in this section of *Reveal* provide background information on hidden issues for facilitators. Tools in other sections are designed to be used with communities.

Questions for a facilitator to consider:

What comes to mind when you think of the word 'witchcraft'?

Are evil and witchcraft things that people are fearful of in your community?

Are children in your community sometimes accused of being witches?

What happens to these children?

What is the role of the church in these situations?

Tens of thousands of children across the world are suffering the impacts of stigma and abuse due to accusations of witchcraft made against them. Some are even killed. Children are accused because people believe that children (and adults) can be possessed by evil spirits that cause misfortune, sickness and death. Many children are starved, beaten, poisoned, burned and abandoned or locked up as a result.

While many churches are caring for orphans and vulnerable children, standing up for children's rights and addressing the issues that lead to their harm, there are sadly some churches and church leaders that take part in this abuse of children, and even encourage and promote it.



What does the Bible say about children?

The Bible shows us that God cherishes and loves all children and requires us to reflect that care in our attitude and actions towards children.

In the Old Testament children are a blessing (for example, Genesis 17:16, 24:60; Deuteronomy 7:14; 1 Samuel 1:15-20; Psalm 127:4-5). Vulnerable children are to be a priority. This is particularly seen in the many references to God's concern for orphans, and his desire for people to care for them (for example, Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:8, 24:17-21, 26:12-13; Psalm 68:5, 82:3-4, 146:9; Isaiah 10:1-2; Jeremiah 7:5-8; Zechariah 7:9-10; Malachi 3:5). God detested the deplorable practice of child sacrifice in the nations of the region, and God's people are prohibited from engaging in this infanticide (Leviticus 18:21, 20:2-5; Jeremiah 32:35; Ezekiel 20:31).

In the New Testament, family life is to be a place of mutual respect. Young children are told to obey their parents 'in the Lord', but parents too are to show love and care to their children. For example, fathers are commanded to refrain from provoking or exasperating their children, which may lead to them becoming angry and embittered (Colossians 3:20-21; Ephesians 6:1-4).

Paul uses the accepted norm of parents providing for their children as a positive example, saying that likewise he will expend all his energy to seek the very best for those in his care (2 Corinthians 12:14-15). Paul also highlights a father's encouragement and a mother's gentleness as examples of the kindness with which he (as a church leader) should treat others (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, 2:11-12).

Jesus welcomed children at every opportunity, and always treated children with respect and dignity. Jesus told his disciples that they too should welcome children and treat them well. There is no record of Jesus ever turning away a child who comes to him, or a parent who comes to him for help on behalf of a child (Matthew 18:2-5, 19:13-14; Mark 9:36-37, 10:13-16; Luke 9:46-48, 18:15-17).

Jesus made it clear that children can relate to God, and have spiritual insight (Matthew 11:25; Luke 10:21). Jesus sought children's health and wellbeing, physically, emotionally, and socially. This is seen in the many occasions in which he heals a sick child, even raises a child from death, and restores the child to the care of the family (Mark 5:38-42; Luke 7:11-15, 8:51-56; John 4:47-51).

On the rare occasions in which a child who is possessed by an evil spirit is brought to Jesus, he addresses the spirit calmly, releases the child from the power of evil, and restores the child's well being, without in any way abusing or harming the child, physically or emotionally (Mark 7:25-30; Mark 9:17-27; Luke 9:38-42). Jesus reserves his harshest judgment for those who seek to cause children to sin (Matthew 18:6). Jesus defended children's creative spontaneity, and their right to have a voice (Matthew 21:15-16).

What does the Bible say about witches and witchcraft?

Many people understand the term ‘witch’ to be someone who intentionally causes misfortune or problems for other people by using innate evil powers, in secret and often during the night. Witchcraft is understood to be this innate, secret, evil power to harm.

Witchcraft and witches as understood in this way, are not found in the Bible. The Bible does not talk of people who do harm to others in secret by using innate evil powers. There is no example of an evil *person* who harms others by invisible means or with the help of a demon. There is no example in the Bible where a person is accused of being a witch, and Jesus never accused anyone of exercising witchcraft.

There are diviners and magicians in the Bible, including those who seek to manipulate nature or to know the future (for example by consulting the dead, like the woman in 1 Samuel 28:7). Diviners are publicly recognised as such. They are people who practice their art in public, and earn their living by using magic or occult practices or divination. Such practices exist in every culture. King Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33 ‘practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists’ (verse 6). But this behaviour was public and visible, rather than in secret - there was no doubt that he was doing such things.

The Bible is very clear that the people of God are forbidden to engage in such practices. Manasseh’s behaviour aroused God’s anger (2 Chronicles 33:6). Christians are forbidden to consult diviners or mediums, or to seek to make contact with the spirits of the dead, or to put their faith in the stars and horoscopes, or even in amulets that bring luck (Deuteronomy 18:10-12; Jeremiah 14:14). These practices seek to bypass or deny the wisdom and omniscience of God and to give glory to Satan. Christians must not play the role of diviner, for example by accusing others of being witches. God abhors and condemns such practices.

A verse in the book of Exodus – ‘Do not allow a sorceress to live’ (Exodus 22:18) – is often used to justify accusations of witchcraft and the torture and murder of people who are accused of witchcraft. In African languages, the word ‘sorceress’ is often translated with a term that is the equivalent to the word ‘witch’. But in Hebrew - the original language of the Old Testament - the word ‘kashaph’ is used, which is closer to the idea of ‘diviner’ or ‘magician’. In every example of this word in the Bible, it is referring to people with a public (and well-paid) role whose job was to help the king, to reveal secrets, or to imitate miracles. For example, in Exodus chapters 7:8-12, we read of Aaron (on God’s command) throwing his staff before Pharaoh and it becoming a snake. In response, Pharaoh summons ‘the wise men and the sorcerers’ (‘kashaph’ in the original text), and they ‘did the same things by their secret arts’ (verse 11). However, it’s important to note that the powers of these magicians were vastly inferior to God’s, which were at work through Aaron. We read in verse 12, ‘But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs.’

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Another example of the term ‘kashaph’ is in Daniel chapter 2:1-3, where King Nebuchadnezzar summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to interpret his dreams. In Hebrew, these verses also use the word ‘kashaph’. As before, this means people who publicly practise their learned art. They are known by the king, and he can easily summon them. They are not ‘witches’ who act in secret to harm others. So this verse in no way justifies the action that is taken against people who are accused of ‘witchcraft’.

It is essential to read the verse from Exodus 22 in context. Exodus 22:18-24 says

“Do not allow a sorceress to live ...

“Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the LORD must be destroyed.

“Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.

“Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.’

God forbids His people to consult diviners or to do the work of a diviner (by making or affirming witchcraft accusations, for example), because diviners seek to usurp God’s place. But God is *extremely* angry with people who mistreat the most vulnerable: widows and orphans. And yet it is orphans and widows who are most often subjected to accusations of witchcraft and the awful consequences which follow from them.

The Bible does contain examples of people who are oppressed or possessed by demons and teaches us that spiritual powers are real and affect the world we live in. The Bible teaches us that these malevolent powers exist and seek to destroy human beings and to push them away from God. They bring death and destruction. The Bible also teaches us the wonderful news that Jesus came to bring people back to God. In Scripture, the people who are oppressed by demons are victims. The demons harm them, and the people who are oppressed suffer because of it. In the Bible, we see problems caused by Satan and his demons but never because a person has sent them. We also see that demons do not need to be encouraged or pushed to kill, steal, lie, accuse or tempt.

It is often very difficult to tell if demonic possession is present, and it is important to discern this carefully using the spiritual gifts that God gives his people. When we are dealing with situations where possession is a possibility, we must follow Christ’s example. Jesus cared for people who were vulnerable, marginalised, sick, and oppressed in society. His first response was always one of love. When he met people who were oppressed by demons, He did not fear them or the demons which oppressed them. He healed the person with compassion and gentleness, and drove out the demons with authority, but never with violence, torture or rituals.

[Source: Adapted from *The Heart of the Matter*, a 5-day training resource developed by the Stop Child Witchcraft Accusations Coalition – <https://stop-cwa.org>, who in turn cite Dr Steven Rasmussen, article on Witches and Diviners, in the Africa Study Bible (pages 662–664), Oasis International Ltd (2017). Article adapted and used with permission.]

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Understanding witchcraft accusations against children

Adults have been accused of witchcraft for centuries. However, accusations against children are a relatively new occurrence in many countries. And they are on the increase. This is partly due to the increasing poverty, violence and conflict in many contexts – and the resulting stresses and pressures on families and communities. When disasters strike and many things appear to go wrong, people may look for ‘scapegoats’ in the community – people for them to blame for things that are not going well in their personal or family circumstances.

In many contexts, a child accused of witchcraft is believed to have power to supernaturally cause harm to others, either deliberately, or sometimes unknowingly, and often at night.

Any misfortune that befalls a family – such as sickness or loss of a job – is attributed to dark, unseen forces. Pinning the blame on a ‘child witch’ is a way to explain and understand the pain and suffering. A child may be singled out by an accuser because they are different in some way, or simply an easy target. Any abnormal behaviour can be taken as ‘proof’ that a child is a witch, including behaviour which is a normal part of child development, for example, bedwetting, difficult behaviour or bad dreams. Children are also targeted who have medical or health conditions, or who are exceptionally intelligent.

In many instances, families are sincere in their beliefs that their children are witches, and they wish to release them from dark forces through deliverance. Others, however, exploit prevailing beliefs and seize on what they see as an opportunity to rid themselves of children they are no longer willing or able to support. Another motive for accusing a child of being a witch may be jealousy. For instance, step-parents may be jealous of step-children in their care. Or family members may be jealous of the success of other family members and bring witchcraft accusations against them or one of their children.

Children accused of witchcraft are often subjected to extreme abuse and harm. Perpetrators of this abuse explain and excuse their actions in terms of ‘purging evil’ from the family and community, based on their own fears and beliefs, and on the fears and beliefs of others. But such interpretations can not justify these actions.



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Sadly, there are some authority figures both inside and outside the church who are keen to profit from family crises and to fuel fears that a child may be a so-called ‘witch’, regardless of the harm that it causes. Some church leaders take part in ‘deliverance’ rites which subject accused children to often brutal and sustained torture.

Sometimes, key Bible passages are misunderstood (sometimes due to mistranslation) to fit a particular cultural context, thereby ‘justifying’ and ‘legitimising’ the abuse. At other times, the accusers are driven by self-interest and greed. In some countries, some church leaders and self-proclaimed ‘prophets’ have developed high-profile and lucrative ‘deliverance’ ministries. However, there are also many church leaders working tirelessly to stop the abuse.

How do such accusations affect children?

As a witch’s power is often seen as something physical, often in their belly, children are subjected to severe physical abuse to ‘drive it out’, including beatings, burning, poisoning, being buried alive, or hot oil enemas. Sometimes, children are forced to confess to being a witch, through being locked up or denied food for days at a time. Even after a child is ‘cleansed’, the stigma associated with an accusation of witchcraft remains. Many children are rejected by their families and thrown out onto the streets. Unicef estimates that there are 20,000 children living on the streets of Kinshasa alone as a direct result of such accusations.

The damage caused to children who are the victims of stigma and abuse through witchcraft accusations is both immediate and long-term.

Childhood is interrupted as they lose out on access to family and education, and opportunities for socialising, play and recreation. The damage to children’s self-esteem and identity is huge; without trauma-counselling and long-term support, it can be permanent. The abuse may also cause severe physical disabilities and disfigurement. All these negative impacts will continue to affect children through teenage years and into adult life.



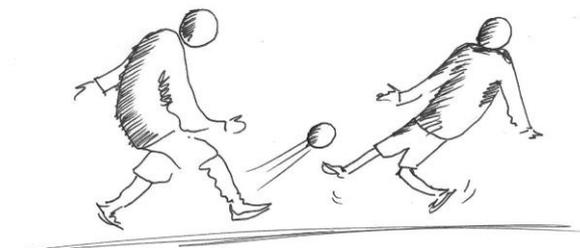
Confronting the problem

The Stop Child Witch Accusations Coalition (<https://stop-cwa.org>) highlights some key lessons in how to begin to address the problem:

- Gentle persuasion works better than confrontation. Shock and anger are natural responses to the abuse that children accused of being witches are suffering. The instinctive reaction is to confront those whose behaviour is so deeply damaging. But confrontation does not generally lead to collaboration.
- Building relationships of mutual respect with community-based organisations and local church leaders is vital.
- It is important to research and understand local realities, beliefs and practices, and not to make assumptions. These local factors need to be explicitly acknowledged and carefully addressed, not dismissed.

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- Training on child witch accusations should initially be described in terms relating to much broader child protection issues to establish common ground. Sensitisation to the subject should be gradual.
- Pastors should never accuse a child of being a witch, nor agree with the assertion that a child is a witch, but rather pray with the child, bless them and speak scripture over them. Spending time with the family, watching the child at play, talking with both parents and child separately may help bring to light any underlying issues (for example, bedwetting or trauma). Affected families need continual pastoral care, for both parents and child, to address these issues.



Using *Reveal*

Reveal includes tools to help you raise the issue of witchcraft accusations against children with communities. You can find these in **Section A2**. You can find Bible studies on God's view of children, Christ's victory over evil and fear, and how Jesus responded to people with evil spirits, in **Section B**.



Notes

The content of this document is adapted from two resources:

- Stop Child Witch Accusations (2017) Roots, realities and responses: lessons learnt in tackling witchcraft accusations against children – <https://stop-cwa.org/resources/31>
- *The Heart of the Matter*, a 5-day training resource developed by the Stop Child Witchcraft Accusations Coalition – <https://stop-cwa.org>



Finding out more

- Stop Child Witch Accusations (2017) Roots, realities and responses: lessons learnt in tackling witchcraft accusations against children - <https://stop-cwa.org/resources/31>
- Stop Child Witch Accusations (2017) A Call to Action: Responding to beliefs that harm children <https://stop-cwa.org/resources/10>

Related tools:

- A2 – How did Jesus respond to children? [A2: Children & youth-5]
- A2 – Understanding accusations of child witchcraft [A2: Children & youth-6]
- B – Christ's victory over evil and fear (Bible study) [B: Children & youth-4]
- B – How Jesus responded to people with evil spirits (Bible study) [B: Children & youth-5]

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