Safeguarding Black African Children in the West Midlands

Introduction

Children and young people can be affected by many different forms of abuse, some may be more vulnerable than others, and significant harm is a very real risk for these children. In recent years research has highlighted the specific needs of newly arrived communities more specifically those from Black, Minority, Ethnic and Refugee (BMER) backgrounds. With the rise in awareness around Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Honour Based Violence as well as Spirit Possession and Witchcraft, Professionals are required to be aware of the emerging issues facing communities from diverse cultural and faith backgrounds and be equipped with the knowledge and skills set to respond to safeguarding concerns effectively.

AFRUCA (Africans Unite against Child Abuse) is one of the leading grass roots organisations working directly with Black African families and children. AFRUCA is embedded in and has developed out of African communities in the UK as a response to the realisation 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 main focus of their work is Prevention and Early Intervention. On the 16th February 2017 AFRUCA held a conference in Birmingham to highlight specific issues facing Black African Communities in the West Midlands.

This paper aims to capture the different issues discussed at the conference.

The event began with a key note speech from Alastair Gibbons, Head of Service for Birmingham Children’s Services, Alastair described Birmingham as one of the most diverse cities within the UK, being the largest single tier authority and having the largest population of all the English Core Cities. Birmingham is extremely diverse in terms of wealth, ethnicity and age. Statistics for Birmingham (as per February 2017) show that 83 African children are open to Children’s Social Care (CSC) and Family Support Services. 24 of those children come from an Eritrean background. The second highest, 16 Children and Young People (CYP), identifying themselves from a Nigerian background. Key messages from Birmingham, state that when exploring the diversity of Children and Young people, professionals must understand that CYP cannot be put under the umbrella of “African Culture”. It is vital to understand the different ways in which Black African CYP identify themselves, some may be Muslim or Catholic some may have Portuguese or French heritage. Each CYP has differing needs and by exploring the background, heritage and ethnicity of the child will aid professionals in being able to respond to issues and concerns more effectively.
Pre-empt or React: Improving Outcomes for Children

Children from the Black African Community are confronted with many issues, specifically being trafficked for domestic servitude and/or CSE, they may be at risk of or suffering FGM, Forced Marriage, Breast Ironing or are branded as a witch, there are also issues affecting those CYP who live in gang affected neighbourhoods and Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC). Professor Claudia Bernard from Goldsmiths University stated that as the diversity of Black African children grows and develops, the issues arising for them in child protection practice take more complex forms. In response to this professionals must address factors to help deepen the understanding of:

- Emerging forms of abuse and the new challenges concerning thresholds for interventions for child protection;
- The dynamics and impact of maltreatment;
- Coping strategies and help-seeking behaviour;
- Access to services;
- The barriers and enablers to engagement with African children and their families.

Cultural Sensitivity Vs Cultural Relativism

Professionals must be able to consider key issues in order to effectively respond to the needs of Black African CYP and their families. A balance must be struck between sensitively challenging claims which are considered the norm for some families, whilst not losing sight of the child’s welfare and keeping the child at the centre of your work. Professor Bernard states that “subjecting cultural practice to scrutiny is necessary to the assessment process if professionals are to achieve better outcomes for children”. Professionals must be able to engage in conversations which can at times be awkward and discomforting and confidently assess the needs of the child and the family. Professionals must distinguish between cultural assets that are seen as strengths in enhancing parents’ emotional and practical resourcefulness, and where parents draw on cultural practices as a justification for certain behaviours that may cause harm to children.

Cultural Intelligence and Successful Assessments

It is essential for professionals to have cultural intelligence when dealing with the diverse range of individuals in society. Research undertaken by AFRUCA has found that a general lack of knowledge and understanding of culture impedes the provision of good quality intervention, assessment and relationships with families. Culture and beliefs must be understood in the context of their relationship to behaviours and practices: culture is a pattern of perceptions, attitudes and behaviours that is accepted and expected by others in a given society. Beliefs are shared ideas people hold collectively within a given culture and these beliefs are also the basis for many of the culture’s norms and values. Some individuals have such strong beliefs that they find it difficult to cope with ideas which may contradict their beliefs. Both culture and belief feeds into individual’s idea of the world which will impact on their behaviours and their practices. Understanding culture facilitates the understanding of how families interpret their own worlds; however some families hide behind a “Cultural Smokescreen” (“it is our culture, it is how we bring up our children”) and
this proves problematic for some professionals. Professionals must equip themselves with being culturally aware, competent and sensitive.

Debbie Ariyo, AFRUCA’s CEO, urges professionals to ask the question: **How do we differentiate between abuse based on genuine cultural practice and abuse caused by wickedness or wrong intention?** Although it may be difficult to navigate two cultures, languages, societies, the same standard of assessment of basic parenting skills should be applied regardless of cultural backgrounds, ethnicity or class.

**Professional Practice**

When working with CYP and Families from BMER communities it is imperative for professionals to assess each family on an individual basis focusing on individual needs. It can prove detrimental to a family’s outcome if they are generalised as a “one size fits all” model. According to Prospera Tedam, the lead for Social Work Practice Quality at Anglia Ruskin University, each assessment and decisions on plans when moving forward should be based on an individual family/child basis.

Requirements for successful outcomes are as follows:

- Competent and confident practitioners who are able to assess and critically analyse information regarding any child/ren at risk;
- Practitioners who are confident to discuss their concerns with families and carers in relation to children who may be at risk;
- Reflective and critical practice;
- An understanding of the relevant legal and policy frameworks;
- An understanding of thresholds and also where to signpost families who do not meet the thresholds for services;
- Work with families and communities - engage specialist ‘third sector’ organisations where necessary;
- Speak to communities and groups;
- Be clear about which legislation and/or legal framework intervention is informed by;
- Understand and utilise contemporary research (for example in the area of involving Black fathers).

**Mixed and Mis-matched: Race, Culture, and Ethnicity in Foster Care**

Dr Fiona Peters, spoke of her research regarding mixed ethnicity CYP being placed into Foster Care. Research shows that 50% of mixed ethnicity individuals are under the age of 16. When a child comes into care and professionals are working on placement planning, race, ethnicity and culture must become central to the placement plan. Dr Peters spoke in depth of a case study regarding a mixed heritage child she was researching. This child was placed into a foster family in which he felt no cultural connection to. The voice of the child was not entirely heard, insofar that he did not identify himself as the same race/culture as the family he was placed with which caused significant difficulties for the child. Professionals must always seek the views of the child and endeavour to understand the individual needs.
FGM and New Perspectives on Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief

Professor Hazel Barrett, from the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University, gave a key note speech explaining FGM in a Safeguarding Context. Globally it is estimated that 200m girls and women have been subjected to FGM. The practice is concentrated in 30 African, Middle Eastern and Asian countries and half of the women who have been subjected to FGM live in three countries: Indonesia, Egypt and Ethiopia. In Somalia, Guinea, Djibouti, Sierra Leone, Mali, Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea over 80% of women aged 15-49 have been subjected to FGM.

Within the UK the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (July 2014) estimated that 170,000 women and girls are survivors of FGM. 65,000 girls aged 13 and under are at risk of FGM in the UK. FGM is still carried out within the UK as it is motivated by a complex mix of interlinked socio-cultural factors. Beliefs associated with religion, hygiene and aesthetics and social acceptance combine to support decision-making in communities in favour of carrying out FGM. FGM is considered to be a social norm amongst practicing communities and actions are interdependent upon the actions of the wider family members and community. The centre created a webapp for both CYP and professionals to better equip themselves with the knowledge and skills. The app for young people petals.coventry.ac.uk is aimed at both girls and boys living in the UK who want to find out more about Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and how it might affect them and others they may know. The webapp for professionals has sections for Teachers, Social Workers, Healthcare Professionals, Police, and gives Advice & Support - http://petals.coventry.ac.uk/professionals/#content.

In recent years there has been an increase in child abuse cases relating to faith or belief. Historically the elders of the community were branded as witches and there were claims that due to certain illnesses they were possessed. However in recent years there has been a shift towards children being branded, there are a number of reasons why and Oladapo Awosokanre, AFRUCA’s project worker presented on this matter. Child abuse linked to faith or belief can be separated into four areas as follows:

- Abuse that occurs as a result of a child being accused of witchcraft or of being a witch;
- Abuse that occurs as a result of a child being accused of being 'possessed by spirits' that is, 'spirit possession';
- Ritualistic abuse;
- Satanic abuse.

In some cultures it is the social reality that individuals believe in spirit possession. Services are encouraged to focus on being able to identify potential victims and focus on sanctioning the harmful behaviours as opposed to debating the existence of it. Like many forms of abuse, the scale linked to faith or belief is underestimated. Professionals are required to have better knowledge (awareness raising and education), as this is an emerging issue Oladapo explained that “there has not been enough to deter culprits, hence the need for a powerful deterrent: a legal provision is required and there is little or no support for victims for their moral, spiritual and social rehabilitation".
Within the UK the Met Police figures for 2003-2015 showed 189 cases of faith based abuse. For the period 1\textsuperscript{st} April 2014 to 31\textsuperscript{st} March 2015, it recorded 60 allegations of faith based abuse. The most tragic cases include the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000, starvation to death of Khyra Ishaq in Birmingham in 2008 and the murder of Kristy Bamu in 2010 following accusation of witchcraft or spirit possession. Accusations of witchcraft and domestic violence has been recorded when wives or children are accused of being witches. Death of victims of FGM has sometimes been attributed to witchcraft instead of attributing it to the effects of cutting. Reports of links between oath rituals and the gang culture across London.

In response to the campaign led by AFRUCA, the government has established a National Working Group of Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief and published a National Action Plan to tackle Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief. AFRUCA highlighted some of the triggers and key players with regards to Spirit Possession and witchcraft. Triggers include: Culture - belief, Religion - faith, Mental health issues and Socio-economic conditions. Parents/Guardians, Relatives/Families, Faith/community leaders and Ethnic groups/communities were all identified as key players.

An accusation of witchcraft and spirit possession has a devastating psychological impact on children and families. AFRUCA believe that there is a lack of holistic service package to address their mental health, faith and social as well as gaps in knowledge among many professionals about witchcraft branding and its impact. It was advocated that to effectively work with families professionals must receive targeted training on these issues so they are better equipped to respond to concerns. When working with families, explore the influence of religious and cultural beliefs, draw a baseline on what is harmful and what is not. Look closer at family stresses, family structures, dynamics, roles, relationships and interactions. This will ensure better working relationships with regards to addressing any ongoing problems which might lead to children being harmed/accused of witchcraft.

**Working with Faith Based Organisations/Institutions**

The day came to an end with a panel discussion from several faith based organisation representatives. The issues discussed highlighted the importance of working with faith based institutions and the representatives agreed that it is imperative for professionals to understand and be aware of the strong relationships many BMER and newly arrived communities have with their respective places of worship. Newly arrived communities in particular will flock straight to their place of worship and find comfort and solace in its surroundings as friendships and social networks groups are formed and families feel they are not isolated. In light of this services must recognise the strength of communities and the relationship between individuals and places of worship, professionals must work closely with faith based organisations to enter into dialogues with them about how to keep children safe and how to educate the wider community. Professionals must ensure that there is a no “blame-culture” and that child abuse exists in all faith groups. There are no “hard-to-reach” communities and by working in collaboration with faith based organisations will lead to breaking certain taboos and myths. It is always vital to remember that no culture or religion can justify harming a child.
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