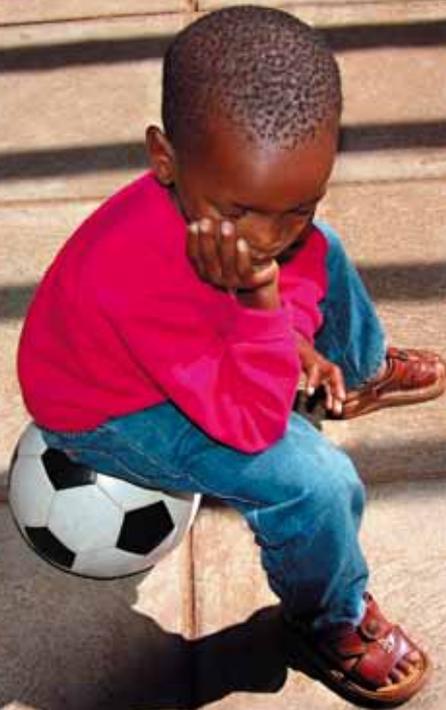


AFRUCA – Africans Unite Against Child Abuse
Promoting the Rights and Welfare of African Children

WHAT IS CHILD NEGLECT?

Safeguarding African Children in the UK Series 9
- 1st Edition



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1 About AFRUCA

AFRUCA – Africans Unite Against Child Abuse was established in May 2001 as a platform for promoting the rights and welfare of African Children in the UK. AFRUCA has developed a national profile as an organisation rooted in the African community bringing specialist knowledge and expertise to the work of practitioners and policy makers to safeguard African children.

AFRUCA works in five key areas to help promote the rights and welfare of African children in the UK:

Awareness Raising and Sensitisation: with African communities and among young Africans about the 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, community leaders and 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.

Community and International Development: in partnership with others, putting in place programmes and projects that help relieve some of the suffering and hardship that African children experience.

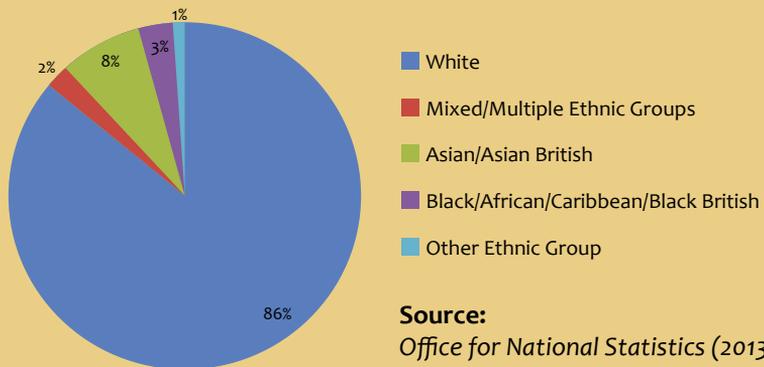
Support for Children Young People and Families: working to support children, young people and African families in crisis or at the point of breakdown through effective early intervention services.

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 multi-cultural 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



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 strive.

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 disciplining 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 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 amongst new arrivals in the UK who 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 are exposed to some forms of neglect because of the level of stress and reality of life experienced by their parents or others looking after them.

ARUCA 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 Child Neglect?”** booklet is the ninth in the series.



3 What is Child Neglect?

The UK government has identified four main categories of child abuse. At AFRUCA we know from experience that these forms of abuse can occur in different ways – especially in places where people are not aware of child protection rules and regulations or do not understand how to ensure children are safeguarded.

The four categories of child abuse are:

- Physical Abuse
- Neglect
- Sexual Abuse
- Emotional Abuse

Although there are other categories, most forms of abuse will fall under one or more of these. You can read more about Child Abuse and the different categories in our publication: [“What is Child Abuse?”](#)

Child neglect is a persistent lack of proper care of children, the failure to provide them with proper nourishment, warmth, medical care, education, a safe environment and housing. It is the failure to act to protect a child from danger or risk of significant harm as described below. Adults who notice that children are being abused and neither say, nor do anything about it, are guilty of neglect. It is also when children are left without appropriate care and supervision.

Child neglect is therefore a form of child abuse. Child neglect involves failing to act to provide the right care and attention to meet a child’s needs. It also includes failure to meet a child’s emotional needs including warmth, security and love.

Neglect often occurs over a prolonged period of time. A consistent failure to provide children with all of the things mentioned above will likely result in serious damage to the child’s health, development and wellbeing.

Child neglect is a type of maltreatment related to the failure to provide needed, age-appropriate care. Unlike physical and sexual abuse, neglect is usually typified by an ongoing pattern of inadequate care and is readily observed by individuals in close contact with the child. Child neglect and emotional abuse are also very closely linked – most children who are emotionally abused are also most likely to be neglected.

The first few years of a child’s life are crucial and sensitive to development. Child neglect is one of the most common forms of child abuse in toddlers especially with children born to young mothers - since they themselves are children and may not have the requisite skills to parent appropriately.

Once children are in school, staff often notice indicators of child neglect whether physical, emotional, educational, and medical neglect such as poor hygiene, poor weight gain, inadequate medical care, or frequent absences from school.

Large numbers of children in the UK African community are referred into the child protection system as a result of physical abuse and neglect. This shows that child neglect is an ongoing problem affecting African children in the country.

4 Child Neglect and "Significant Harm"

The government uses what it calls "significant harm" to decide at what point to intervene in a family to safeguard a child believed to be at risk of abuse or harm. In the UK, when a local authority has reasons to believe a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm, it has a legal duty to make enquiries to assess what is happening to that child. Although this sort of activity can be regarded by parents or carers as interfering in their family, it is usually seen by the law to be done in "the best interests of the child".

For most African people, child-raising has always been a communal, community affair - it takes a village to raise a child. However, in the UK, the state takes over that role; its position largely strengthened by a wide array of laws that are complex, difficult to understand, and not well publicised. Many of our parents, mainly out of ignorance, their beliefs and cultural practices or a lack of communal support in bringing up children are guilty of breaching these laws, thereby causing "significant harm". The consequences of breaching these laws can be dire and permanent for many parents such as losing their child by having it removed and placed into the care of the local authority.

With this booklet, we want to help parents and others gain a better knowledge of what it means for children in our community to suffer from "significant harm" caused by child neglect and what they can do to help address it.



5 Forms of Child Neglect in the African Community

Child neglect can be intentional or not. However the basic issue is the failure to provide or ensure provision of the child's needs. Neglect can lead to some obvious physical symptoms in the short term. Prolonged child neglect can lead to serious emotional and psychological symptoms as well.

Forms of Neglect:

- Physical neglect when children are not provided with basic care (frequently going hungry; dirty clothes; no bath; living in dangerous conditions; or in crowded accommodation).
- Medical neglect where the child's basic health needs are not met. (Not taken to GP or hospital when ill; not given medication).
- Emotional neglect where the child has no emotional support or guidance (No warmth; no love). Child neglect is common with children who have been accused of witchcraft or of being possessed by evil spirits since this often leads to ostracisation, isolation and abandonment. Also children who are used as domestic servants or slaves are often neglected and their needs unmet.
- Educational/developmental neglect where the child has been denied an education (no school; lack of support for development; finding it hard to adapt).
- Leaving children home alone with no adult supervision and care is a big problem among many African families. This is one of the main reasons children are referred into the child protection systems. Children left alone are prone to risk of harm and danger.
- Regular fasting or regular failure to feed the child is a form of child neglect. Children denied food over a period of time who regularly go hungry as a result are being neglected. "Dry fasting" in particular, in which children are made to go without food and water for days is a form of child neglect.

6 What Are the Signs of Child Neglect?

There are many signs to show that a child is being neglected:

- 1 frequently going hungry and having nutritional deficiencies
- 2 stealing food
- 3 frequently going to school in dirty clothes
- 4 poor hygiene and poor dental care - uncombed and tangled hair, dirty nails, skin rashes, body odours
- 5 not being taken to the doctor when they're ill - unattended medical and dental needs
- 6 being isolated, ostracised, abandoned or deserted
- 7 living in dangerous conditions ie around drugs, alcohol and violence, finding it difficult to adapt to the school environment, not registered at school, or not attending school and no evidence of home schooling
- 8 finding it difficult
- 9 lack of shelter
- 10 consistent lack of supervision - being left alone regularly to look after themselves
- 11 ingestion of cleaning fluids, drugs, alcohol, medicines, etc.
- 12 inappropriate clothing and shoes for weather conditions
- 13 developmental delays (e.g. language, weight)
- 14 lack of parental participation and interest - for example in child's education
- 15 misuse of alcohol/drugs
- 16 regularly displays fatigue or lethargy, falls asleep in class
- 17 reports that no caregiver is at home
- 18 frequently absent or late for school/nursery
- 19 drops out of school (adolescent)
- 20 takes over adult caring role

These signs in isolation may not prove abuse or neglect but they do tell us we need to know more about the child's circumstances. They may be the result of family issues such as the death of a significant person or the arrival of a new sibling. The important thing to know is what the signs are, and how to report them if you think a child may need protection.

7 What Are The Causes of Child Neglect

The issue of child neglect is very common within the African communities and families in the UK. Experience has shown us that there are some common issues among parents or adult carers that are associated with neglect of children. These include:

a Parental mental health

When a parent especially the mother or main carer has mental health issues it is often reflected in the treatment of the children. Most obvious issues will be around basic hygiene, feeding and clothing. Children will show signs of not being properly cared for and are often left to care for themselves.

b Poverty and Unemployment

For most African parents or carers in the UK without recourse to public funds, it is very difficult to get an income that enables them to look after themselves and their children. When they are able to secure employment, in many cases it involves working long and unsociable hours hence limiting their chances of looking after their children properly. Many parents, especially if they live in areas where they are isolated from friends and community members, find themselves in situations where they need to leave the children on their own when they go out to work. The responsibility for looking after the younger children is usually left to the eldest child who is under no circumstances suitable to look after other children being a child him/herself.

c Culture and tradition

Culture and tradition also play their role in child neglect within African communities and families. Many parents may be repeating a pattern learned from their own upbringing.

In most parts of Africa, children are pushed to do 'adult jobs' from a young age and are given lots of praise for doing so. Often, maturity and good manners are judged based on the ability to perform household chores and look after themselves and their siblings. It is common in Africa for children as young as eight to be expected to cook and wash for the whole family, sweep the house and perform other chores both before and after a school day.

The role of the female child, in particular, is focussed on keeping a home in good order. Girls are socialised from a very young age into "keeping the home" as it will be expected of them to be able to do so when they get older and get married. When people migrate from Africa to the UK, they expect children to do what they were doing in Africa and are unaware of the accompanying danger and problems or that it is against the law.

d Firstborn Syndrome

Being a firstborn child in an African family can be both a privilege and a burden. The first child is expected to be a role model for the rest of the siblings and a

heavy burden is placed on the child to behave well and do things in a certain way. Firstborn children are expected to look after their siblings. Parents sometimes do not recognise the risks and child protection issues surrounding this.

e Child trafficking and exploitation

Children who are trafficked into the African community suffer the most significant form of child neglect. This is because many of them live below the radar in this country at the mercy of their traffickers and without coming to the attention of the authorities. They are hardly looked after and sometimes they do not go to school. Many of the young victims of trafficking we have worked with at AFRUCA are not registered with a doctor or a dentist. They can be isolated and so are prone to other forms of child abuse including physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse. They work long hours and are often the ones to wake up early and the last to go to sleep. They are denied food, clothing, education and their health needs are hardly met. You can read more about child trafficking in our booklet: **“What is Child Trafficking?”**

f “African Time”

“African Time” is a euphemism for the practice in which people consistently fail to meet time commitments. In relation to children, it can involve failing to take children to school on time or pick them up on time, failing to deal with health issues as soon as they occur and delaying action to meet a child’s needs. It can mean being late for important hospital appointments thereby denying the child access to timely health-care. Our view is that “African Time” impacts negatively on children and in some instances put them at risk of significant harm. This is especially so in situations where action has been unnecessarily delayed due to a lack of consideration for the urgent nature or the child’s needs.

g Religious beliefs

- **Forced Fasting**

Some parents force children to fast for religious purposes, denying them food and even water - sometimes for days. This is another form of child neglect because children do not choose to fast. When they express the wish to do so, they might not understand the health implications involved.

- **Witchcraft branding and exorcism**

Children who are branded as witches or as being possessed by evil spirits are subjected to many forms of abuse and harm to punish them for their perceived evil deeds, but also in efforts to exorcise them of the evil spirits seen as possessing them. The very act of branding a child a witch is emotional abuse leading to ostracisation and isolation. Branding children as witches can therefore lead to extreme child neglect because people might believe they deserve to be harmed because they are evil.

You can read more about Child Branding as Witches in our Booklet: **“What is Witchcraft Abuse?”**

- **Night Vigil**

Children whose parents regularly attend Church or Mosque night vigils or prayer sessions may, in the absence of child-care, attend those same sessions which means they do not get a good night’s sleep before going to school in the morning. This can lead to sleep deprivation impacting on the child’s health and ability to concentrate in school. Deliberate sleep deprivation is a form of child neglect.

- **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Forced Marriage**

It is child neglect to put children at risk of female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage. Both are illegal in the UK and it is also illegal to perform FGM on a UK resident whether in the UK or abroad. There have been many instances where parents have taken their children on holiday to their countries of origin - only for their extended relatives to force FGM on the children or force them to get married to total strangers - at an early age. Putting children at such risk of harm is illegal as well as failing to act to prevent FGM being performed on a girl or a girl being forced into a marriage ceremony. You can read more about FGM in our Booklet: **“What is FGM?”**

h Domestic Violence

Children growing up in an environment where there is domestic violence also become victimised in many ways. Both parents, caught up in their own issues, might not make efforts to look after the children and meet their ongoing needs. Witnessing both parents regularly fight and beat each other is a form of child emotional abuse but can also lead to child neglect when the psychological impact is not addressed.

i “I Don’t Care” Attitude

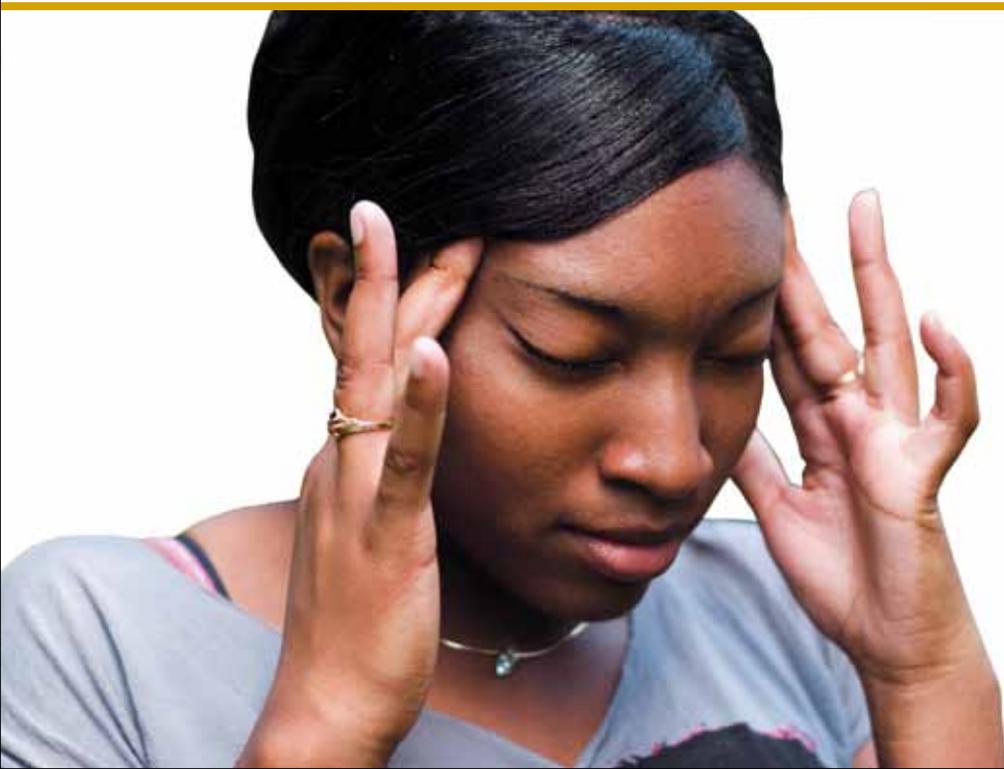
Many acts of abuse go unnoticed and unreported in our community because those who know what is going on, who are witnesses to the abuse, are not interested in doing anything about it. Failure to act to protect children being abused is a form of child neglect. This is what we call the “I don’t care” attitude. Either because of their immigration status or due to other personal circumstances, many people do not want to get involved with the authorities. When they see abuse going on, they close their eyes to it and fail to act.

8 What Are the Effects of Child Neglect?

Child Neglect in its various forms can have a serious effect on a child's long term physical, mental and emotional well-being and development. For babies and very young children, these effects can be life-threatening. Children deprived of access to medical care might end up with severe disability or physical impairment. Children provided with inappropriate nutrition can become obese as adults or end up with eating disorders. Children who are deprived of access to education might end up with poor outcomes and quality of life as adults.

An adult who fails to act to protect a child from harmful practices like Female Genital Mutilation or Forced marriage may invariably contribute to the child's long term abuse – even death. Children left home alone without supervision or in care of other children may end up causing harm to themselves and others or may find themselves in situations where they are not able to act to prevent harm.

Children who are trafficked or branded as witches are especially vulnerable to extreme abuse and harm. These can have very devastating impact on their short and long term health and wellbeing. Many victims suffer into adulthood the terrible effects of their experiences which can lead to serious mental health problems especially post traumatic stress disorder.



9 Working as a Community to Protect Children From Neglect

Across the country, African children are disproportionately over-represented in Local Authorities child protection figures under the categories of physical abuse and neglect. This can lead to children being temporarily removed from their families and taken into care to prevent them from further harm. In other cases, those children are permanently lost to their families as they are given up for adoption. Many children's lives are ruined as a result of their experiences of different forms of abuse and child neglect.

Everyone in our community must be able to recognise the indicators of child neglect. They must be aware of the different ways children can be neglected and the impact, which is not different from the effects of child abuse. In addition, they must know what to do to protect children from neglect as follows:

1. Children must not be left home alone. While it is not illegal to leave children alone at home, doing so is illegal if it leads to children being put at risk of harm. Parents must explore different ways to provide appropriate child-care which might include setting up a local group child-care scheme with other parents, calling on reliable neighbours to help out or seeking the support of friends and family members. There is further information in our **“Manual on Child Protection for African Parents”** about how to ensure children are not put at risk of harm by leaving them home alone. You can order a copy of this publication by contacting our offices.
2. Faith organisations must ensure there are appropriate children's facilities in place when conducting night vigils and other activities. It is a safeguarding issue when children are not provided with adequate care and supervision when they are within a faith group's premises - because not doing so puts children at risk of harm. AFRUCA has produced a manual for faith organisations on safeguarding. You can download and read a copy of this in French, English and Arabic on our website at www.afruca.org.
3. Many cultural practices like branding children as witches, female genital mutilation, forced marriages, using children as domestic slaves as well as the harsh treatment of girls and firstborn children need to be revisited. At AFRUCA, we are actively campaigning against these practices.

We run very regular community education events and activities across the country. In particular, our Children's Champion's Project across London and the South of England, and our Anti-FGM Youth Project across Greater Manchester ensure we are able to regularly pass on the message that children must be protected and safeguarded from abuse and harm at all times.

You can learn more about how to protect children from child neglect and other forms of abuse by taking part in our range of community activities which are often well advertised on our website at www.afruca.org and on social

media. You can also become an AFRUCA Champion and help to spread the child protection message. Further information is available on our website.

4. It is wrong to turn a blind eye when you see child abuse and neglect happening. People who do so are contributing to a child's suffering. Failure to act to prevent abuse can be a contributory factor in a child's death and long term harm.



10 Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

If you see a child being abused, harmed or neglected in any way, you must report this to the authorities as follows:

- Step One** 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, or you can find this online.
- Step Two** 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.
- Step Three** 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 if you do not wish to.
- Step Four** 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.
- Step Five** You can also call the police on 999 to report a case of child abuse.
- Step Six** 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 Resources on Child Safeguarding

We hope you found this booklet useful. There is a lot of information out there that can help you carry out the task of protecting and safeguarding children.

At AFRUCA we have produced a range of materials to help parents, carers, faith and community leaders and workers. Here is a list of publications where parents can get additional information.

AFRUCA Manuals:

- Manual on Child Protection for African Parents in the UK (in English and French)
- Manual on Safeguarding Children for African Faith Organisations in the UK (in Arabic, English and French)

Safeguarding African Children in the UK 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?

Support our Work: Donate to AFRUCA

Your support will enable us to make plans for long term work to address the abuse and exploitation of African children in the UK and in Africa.

Donations are made securely online at
www.justgiving.com/afruca

You can also donate by text: just text our code **AFRU01** + the amount you wish to give to **70070**. It is Quick, Easy and Free on all networks in the UK!

Notes



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

1. What is Child Abuse?
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