

APSAC FACT SHEET

AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY ON THE ABUSE OF CHILDREN

RITUAL ABUSE

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"Ritual abuse" is one of the most-talked-about, rarest, and least-understood forms of alleged child maltreatment. Experts disagree about whether or not "ritual abuse" exists, the range of situations to include in the category, and the extent and significance of these situations. Some argue that the term "ritual abuse" should be abandoned because it confuses more than it clarifies. Many more questions than answers exist about this highly controversial topic,

WHAT IS "RITUAL ABUSE"?

Most allegations of what comes to be called "ritual abuse" involve one or more of the following elements: terrorizing acts (e.g., threats to kill parents, pets, or loved ones if the abuse is disclosed); acts involving supernatural symbolism or ritual (e.g., the use of masks or robes, the use of crosses or pentagrams); acts involving real or simulated killing of animals and sometimes human infants (these acts can serve both ritual and terrorizing ends); acts involving real or simulated ingestion of urine, feces, blood, and "magic potions" which might include mind-altering substances; severe sexual abuse, often including penetration with objects.

Experts have proposed that allegations often classified as "ritual abuse" might reflect three very different situations (Finkelhor & Williams, 1988);

Cult-based ritual abuse. The hallmark of this type of abuse is an elaborated spiritual belief system not sanctioned by any of the major organized religions. Abuse of children is probably not the ultimate goal, but the vehicle for inducing in adults a quasi-religious state and for creating and maintaining a particular spiritual or social system. The belief system may or may not be "satanic."

Pseudoritualistic abuse. The primary goal is the abuse of children. Masks, costumes, visits to graveyards, threats of harm to the children and their families, and the killing of animals may be ways to intimidate children into participating, to prohibit their disclosure of the abuse, and to discredit their accounts if they do **tell**.

Psychopathological ritualism. Ritualistic acts are part of the obsessive or delusional system of a mentally disturbed individual, rather than the reflection of a developed ideology.

Such allegations might also be false, the result of fantasy or delusion on the part of the alleged victim (sometimes fed by books or television), or of misinterpretation or suggestion by interveners, including parents, police officers, therapists, and others.

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE FOR "RITUAL ABUSE"?

Supervisory Special Agent Kenneth Lanning, MS, of the FBI, with extensive experience consulting on multi-victim, multi-perpetrator child sexual abuse cases, concluded that there is no evidence for a widespread satanic conspiracy perpetrating cult-based ritual abuse (Lanning, 1992). Other reputable nationwide studies support this conclusion (Bottoms, Shaver, & Goodman, in press).

Because professionals disagree about what constitutes "ritual abuse," and no mechanisms are in place at the local, state, or national levels to track reports of ritual abuse or to investigate the validity of ritual elements in abuse reports, no reliable data are available about its prevalence. A recent nationwide study has concluded that many allegations of abuse now referred to as "ritualistic" have nothing to do with supernatural beliefs, satanists, or organized cults (Bottoms, Shaver, & Goodman, in press).

In one national research study of sexual abuse in day care (Finkelhor & Williams, 1988), one or more ritual *elements* were alleged in 13% of cases. The researchers could not determine whether these allegations were true or false, or whether they might pertain to cult-based ritual abuse, pseudoritualistic abuse, or psychopathological ritualism.

Much more evidence exists for religion-related abuse (i.e., abuse driven by beliefs associated with non-sataoic religions or perpetrated by someone with religious authority) than for ritual abuse (Bottoms, Shaver, Goodman, & Qin, in press). Religion-related abuse includes such acts as "beating the devil out of a child," abusive "exorcism," and "deliverance" ceremonies, sexual abuse by clergy, and religiously motivated medical neglect.

WHO IS ALLEGED TO PERPETRATE "RITUAL ABUSE"?

Sexual abuse in which ritual elements are alleged is typically perpetrated by two or more people acting in concert. Whereas most surveys indicate that males are responsible for more than 95 percent of sexual abuse perpetrated against individual children, females comprise 40 percent to 55 percent of alleged perpetrators acting in concert (Finkelhor & Williams, 1988; Faller, 1994).

WHAT DO CHILD ABUSE PROFESSIONALS BELIEVE ABOUT RITUAL ABUSE?

Professionals are divided over whether or not "ritual abuse" occurs. Much of the controversy in the professional community would likely disappear with the introduction of a coherent, widely accepted definition of "ritual abuse."

No reliable data are available on the prevalence of different beliefs about "ritual abuse" among professionals. However, in a nationwide study of thousands of interdisciplinary professionals, 31 percent of mental health professionals reported having encountered one or more allegations of child abuse that included ritual elements, as defined by the researchers. A very small group of clinicians (1.4 percent), each claiming to have treated scores of cases, accounted for most of the reports of ritualistic child abuse (Bottoms, Shaver, & Goodman, in press).

A very high percentage of professionals who encountered reports of ritual abuse from patients believed those reports, based largely on patients' strong affect and apparently abuse-related behavioral symptoms, even though other corroborative evidence was often lacking (Bottoms, Shaver, & Goodman, in press).

WHAT IS THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM RESPONSE TO ALLEGED "RITUAL ABUSE"?

Some studies have found that allegations of sexual abuse involving ritual elements are prosecuted at a lower rate than allegations without such elements (Finkelhor & Williams, 1989). Others have found no significant difference in the rate at which these allegations are prosecuted (Faller, 1994). Ritualistic elements that lack corroboration can discredit otherwise verifiable accounts of abuse, and are often downplayed by prosecutors (Faller, 1994).

True accounts of abuse can include false elements that reflect fantasy on the part of victims, misinterpretation or suggestion by interveners, or deception by perpetrators. One of the most difficult challenges for child abuse professionals today is establishing criteria for distinguishing between true and false elements in accounts of abuse.

SOURCES

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