

Safeguarding against female genital mutilation Guidance

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a surprisingly common form of abuse in the UK.

FGM is a collective term for all procedures involving the partial or total removal of external female genitalia for cultural or other nontherapeutic reasons.

In the UK it is considered to be child abuse, FGM is illegal. It is also illegal to take a child abroad for FGM purposes.

The practice is normally carried out on girls between the ages of 4 and 13, although the majority of cases are thought to take place between the ages of 5 and 8.

Countries where FGM is particularly common practise

- Burkino Faso
- Djibouti
- Egypt
- Eritrea
- Ethiopia
- The Gambia
- Guinea
- Liberia
- Mali
- Mauritania
- Sierra Leone
- Somalia
- Sudan

One of the difficulties is that FGM-practising families may not see it as an act of abuse. It is accepted practice in some communities, and this can make it very difficult for a girl or any other member of her family to come forward. Not having undergone FGM can be considered to make a girl unsuitable for marriage.

The Impact on Girls

The procedure has no health benefits and can cause

- Severe bleeding
- Infection
- Problems urinating
- Potential childbirth complications leading to deaths of newborns.

The impact of undergoing FGM is not only physical; the fact that the procedure has been inflicted on the girl by her family makes it particularly traumatic.

How to identify FGM

The time when FGM is most likely to take place is at the start of the summer holidays, as there is then sufficient time for the girl to recover before returning to school.

Risk Factors

Schools should be particularly alert to signs when a girl comes from a community where FGM is practised

Other risk factors include:

- Where the family is less integrated within UK society.
- Where the mother or other women in the extended family have also been subject to FGM.
- Where a girl has been withdrawn from sex education lessons and there is a reluctance for her to be informed about her body and her rights.

Indicators that FGM is imminent

Indicators that it might take place include:

- Being a girl between the ages of 5-8 within a community where FGM is practised.
- When a female elder visits, particularly if she arrives from another country.
- A girl talking about a 'special procedure' or saying that she is attending a special ceremony to become a woman.
- A girl being taken out of the country for a prolonged period.

Indicators that it has taken place

Indications that FGM has already taken place include:

- A girl having difficulty walking, sitting or standing.
- She spends longer than normal going to the toilet.
- She spends long periods of time away from the classroom during the day because of bladder or menstrual problems.
- Prolonged or repeated absence from school.
- Withdrawal or depression when a girl returns to school after a prolonged period of absence.
- Reluctance to undergo normal medical examinations.

What schools should do:

As FGM is a form of child abuse, it should be dealt with according to the child protection policy

Do not reveal that enquiries might be related to FGM as this could increase the risk to the girl

Contact social care through the designated senior person.

Social care may approach the police for assistance and there might be a joint investigation. Particular attention may be given to other family members who might also be at risk.

Support the girl

If a girl does make a disclosure, it is important to note that it must be reported to social care even if it is against the girl's wishes, as it is against the law. However, the reasons for this should be explained.

Counselling and other forms of support that the school has should be made available.