



Redbridge Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB)

Quick Learning Guide to ... Breast Ironing

What is it?

Breast ironing, also known as breast flattening, is a process where girls as young as nine are forced to have their breasts bound or pounded and burned with a range of implements, including hot stones and hammers, to disguise signs of pubescent development. It is often performed by mothers in a misguided attempt to protect their daughters and to prevent them from being sexually harassed, raped, abducted or forced into early marriage.

Where is it happening?

It is most commonly practised in Western and Central African countries such as Cameroon, Benin, Chad and the Ivory Coast. However, there are cases in the UK of girls living in African communities in London, Birmingham, Manchester and other major cities. The United Nations estimate nearly four million women around the world are affected and that 58% of the perpetrators are the victim's mother. As at April 2016, there have been two arrests in London and Birmingham, but no one has yet been charged.

How harmful is it?

Like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), breast ironing is a harmful cultural practice, and an example of gender based violence. It is recognised as physical child abuse. The practice is extremely painful and can cause permanent tissue damage, serious health problems such as cancer, abscesses and infections, and problems with future breastfeeding. As well as being physically damaging, it can have a serious impact on social and psychological well-being and development.

Signs and Indicators

Professionals working with children and young people need to be aware of the signs and symptoms of girls who are at risk of or have undergone breast ironing. These can include:

- Unusual behaviour after an absence from school, including depression, anxiety, aggression, etc.
- Reluctance to undergo normal medical examinations;
- Requests for help that are not specific due to embarrassment or fear;
- Lack of participation in physical activities – such as sports – due to fear of bandages or scares being visible during changing or showering.

How should I respond?

The United Nations has listed the ritual as one of the five under-reported crimes relating to sexual violence. There is no specific law in the UK on breast ironing. However, as recognised physical abuse it must be referred to [Children's Social Care](#).

Useful links, resources and further reading:

- [TriX Policy Briefing No. 164 – Breast Ironing](#)
- [London Child Protection Procedures, 5th Edition, 2016](#)
- [Culture and Faith – Learning from Serious Case Reviews \(SCRs\), NSPCC, 2014](#)

In the media:

- [Breast Ironing in the UK](#), The Independent, 14 October 2015
- [The brutal practice of breast ironing is becoming endemic in the UK](#), The Metro, 20 March 2016
- [Breast Ironing – what it is and why MPs want to ban it](#), The Daily Telegraph, 23 March 2016
- [Campaigners warn of breast ironing in the UK](#), Channel 4 News, 18 April 2014

Discussion points:

1. How should we respond when this practice is seen as part of 'cultural' or 'religious' practice?
2. What do we think of the argument that this might protect a young girl from rape or early marriage?
3. What physiological impact could this have on a young girl and what dilemmas might they face?
4. How can we make it easier in our agency or setting for young girls to speak up about this practice?
5. What can we do to raise awareness of this form of abuse within our agency or setting?

This Quick Learning Guide is one of a series based on different safeguarding topics that have been produced by the Redbridge LSCB. They provide basic information to raise awareness of an issue and how to respond to it. The sheets can be used by Teams as part of a Development Day, Team Meeting, or during a one-to-one coaching session. The aim is to increase access to learning for front line practitioners, as part of a wide range of learning and development activities. The LSCB welcome feedback on this or any other safeguarding topic. Just complete our [Contact Form](#) or contact the LSCB on 020 8708 5282.