This article introduces social workers to the beliefs and practices associated with Paganism, Witchcraft, and Wicca and describes how social workers can help to create a welcoming environment for children and youths belonging to these religious minority groups. Drawing on social science research, social work literature, and a case example, the author presents suggestions for working with Pagan children and youths in various practice settings, including child welfare agencies, schools, and family-oriented programs.

KEY WORDS: children; Paganism; spirituality; Wicca; youths

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ocial workers have become increasingly aware of the importance of spirituality and religion in clients’ lives (Canda & Furman, 1999; Walsh, 1999). Most exploration of the role of spirituality in social work has focused on the major American religious denominations (Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism), with some attention paid to smaller groups such as Muslims and Native Americans (for example, Hodge, 2005; Hurdle, 2002).

This article explores social work practice with children and youths who belong to a small but growing spiritual community: those who identify themselves as Pagans, Witches, and Wiccans. To provide sensitive, appropriate services for members of this population, it is important for social workers to be familiar with the characteristics of Pagan spirituality. This article outlines the major beliefs, practices, and characteristics of this community and offers some general considerations for social work practice with a Pagan population. It then addresses factors relating to work with children, youths, and families.

Although some literature examines the role of spirituality in social work, there is almost no professional literature on the topic of Paganism within the fields of social work and counseling psychology. McQuaide’s (1999) case study involves a Wiccan client; Kennedy (2003) provided a brief overview of Neo-Paganism for counselors; and Wicca is briefly described in Canda and Furman (1999). Therefore, I incorporated data from studies of Neo-Pagans in other social science disciplines (such as anthropology and sociology), as well as literature on Paganism and Witchcraft written by practitioners.

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

For the purposes of this article, Paganism (also called Neo-Paganism) is used as an umbrella term that includes a variety of nature-based spiritual paths, which typically are nonmonotheistic and honor the divine in both male and female form. (The material presented in this section is widely available in books on Paganism and Wicca, see for example, Adler, 1986; Cunningham, 1988; Starhawk, 1999.) The terms “Pagan,” “Wiccan,” and “Witch” overlap but are not interchangeable, and practitioners themselves disagree about the meanings of the terms. A common distinction, as described by Carpenter (1996), is that Paganism typically refers to spiritual paths characterized by nature worship and polytheism or pantheism, whereas Witchcraft focuses on the practice of magic and healing and implies a feminist political inclination. Because the term “witchcraft” in American culture may refer to any use of magic, social workers should not assume that a client’s use of the term indicates a Neo-Pagan identity as described in this article. Within the Pagan community, Witchcraft (often capitalized to differentiate the term from general usage) refers to a Pagan religion inspired by pre-Christian European spiritual traditions.

Some Pagans do not identify as Witches; they may identify as Goddess Worshippers, Druids,
Neo-Shamans, or members of other groups seeking to recreate ancient religions (for example, Greek, Norse, or Egyptian). *Wicca*, which emerged in the 1940s in England, is the original form of modern Pagan Witchcraft. Carpenter (1996) pointed out that the term *Wicca* is preferred by many Witches because it does not have a history of negative connotations.

Pagans typically practice their religion alone (as “solitaries”) or in small spiritual support groups (called *circles* or *covens*). A *coven* is a committed, long-term group with a high degree of intimacy and cohesion within the group, and relatively stable, fixed membership. A *circle* usually refers to a group characterized by a more fluid membership and a lower degree of group intimacy. Covens and circles are generally decentralized and autonomous; there are several national organizations dedicated to Pagan activism, education, and networking, but there is no single group to which all Pagans and Witches belong. Unlike many religions, which are characterized by a central dogma or creed, Pagan spiritual paths generally do not require practitioners to subscribe to a particular set of beliefs. Therefore, Pagan beliefs vary widely, even among people who practice together. Some of the most commonly held beliefs among Pagans include the following:

**Nature is sacred**, and forms a web of life in which all beings are interconnected.

**The divine is both male and female** (God and Goddess) and is often represented in the forms of specific gods and goddesses from various cultures (for example, Celtic, Norse, Egyptian). Wiccans typically view the Goddess as a Moon Goddess with three aspects (Maiden, Mother, and Crone) represented by the waxing, full, and waning moons, and they honor the God as a Horned God of nature and wildlife.

**Nature is composed of four spiritual elements** (Earth, Air, Fire, and Water). The pentacle (a five-pointed star in a circle, commonly worn by Pagans to signify their spiritual path) represents these four elements in addition to the all-encompassing Spirit.

**People can create change in their lives by practicing magic**, which consists of focusing intention and energy toward a goal through the use of symbolic rituals. Pagans may work magic to achieve practical goals (for example, a job or an apartment) or for psychological purposes (for example, to overcome an addiction or to increase self-confidence). Most Pagans and Witches believe that working harmful magic will bring back harmful consequences to the sender. Many Pagans also practice divination, that is, seeking insight through interpretation of symbols such as Tarot cards or Norse runes (ancient Germanic characters).

The holidays most widely celebrated by Pagans are the summer and winter solstices, the spring and autumn equinoxes, and four holidays of Celtic origin that fall in between: Samhain (pronounced *SOW-in*) (October 31), Imbolc (February 2), Beltane (May 1), and Lammas or Lughnasadh (usually pronounced *LOO-nah-sah*) (August 2). The new and full moons are also times of celebration and ritual. Rituals vary widely depending on the participants and the occasion, but usually center around a symbolic action to work magic or to celebrate the season (for example, burning a candle consecrated for a specific purpose, dramatizing a seasonal myth, or dancing and singing). Rituals may also be held to celebrate the transitions of life, for example, a baby blessing, a youth’s coming of age ceremony, or a “handfasting” (marriage).

**DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS**

It is difficult to calculate the total number of Pagans and Witches, as they typically practice alone or in small, autonomous groups, and there is no central organization. In addition, many Pagans and Witches are wary of disclosing their religion and may not identify themselves as such. The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) estimates that there are 307,000 Wiccan, Druid, and Pagan adults in the United States (Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2005); another group extrapolates from the ARIS totals to suggest there are 750,000 Wiccans (excluding non-Wiccan Pagans) in the United States (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, 2005).

Some demographic information on Pagans and Witches has been collected by anthropologists and sociologists, who have paid considerable attention to this subculture. The majority of these studies have been qualitative and have focused on understanding the experiences of Neo-Pagan individuals and groups (for example, Berger, 1999; Pike, 2001). Carpenter (1996) described the challenges in establishing a representative sample of this group, as Pagans lack a single organizational structure, tend to mistrust conventional authority, and may be concerned about harassment or discrimination. Therefore, although research has indicated some
A large majority of Pagans are white; Berger, Leach, and Shaffer (2003) found 90.8 percent of respondents to their survey of American Neo-Pagans identified as white; the studies reviewed by Carpenter (1996) generally found that a majority of Pagans were of European descent. Although these percentages may not represent the exact racial and ethnic makeup of the community, Witchcraft and Wicca in particular draw mostly on European traditions, which may be especially appealing to those of European ancestry.

In addition, Berger et al. (2003), Jorgensen and Russell (1999), and Orion (1995) have found that Pagans have a higher level of formal education than does the American population as a whole (an observation supported by Carpenter’s [1996] literature review). However, all three studies found that the median income level among respondents was equivalent to the national average for the United States. Berger et al. attributed this discrepancy between education and earnings to the high percentage of women in the Pagan population (estimates in the three studies cited above range from 57 percent to 65 percent), as women tend to earn less than men. Most researchers have noted that women are more likely than men to be drawn to Paganism because of its emphasis on female images of the divine.

CREATING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT
Social workers do not always ask about clients’ religious beliefs, and clients may not always feel comfortable sharing this information. This is particularly true for Pagan clients, who may fear negative reactions if they disclose their religion. Cookson (1997) offered numerous examples of religious freedom issues faced by Wiccans in the United States, ranging from minor to severe. For example, Foltz (2000) interviewed several Pagans and practitioners of Goddess spirituality who were made to feel unwelcome in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings (both indirectly and directly) because of their spiritual beliefs. At the more extreme end of the spectrum, Cookson (1997) and Adler (1986) both interviewed mothers who lost custody of their children in divorce cases because of the mothers’ involvement in Witchcraft or Wicca.

Given cases such as these, Pagans and Witches are likely to be cautious when disclosing their religion to individuals in positions of authority. A basic familiarity with beliefs, practices, holidays, and terminology associated with Paganism and Wicca would help social workers to identify their Pagan clients, who may be reluctant to identify themselves directly but may drop hints or subtle cues. Some examples of common clues include the following: wearing Celtic, Norse, or Goddess–related jewelry; referring to celebrating the Solstices, the Equinoxes, or other Pagan holidays; or describing their spirituality in general terms such as “earth-based spirituality” or “nature-based religion.” (These examples are possible indicators, but do not necessarily signify a Pagan identity.) Many of these Pagan clients may be watching for the worker’s response to such cues before volunteering more information.

Other Pagan clients may not offer indications of their spiritual path but still may be attentive to any signs given by the worker of his or her own religious affiliation or attitudes toward spirituality. Although it is a basic principle of spiritually sensitive social work that proselytization is not appropriate in a worker–client relationship (Canda & Furman, 1999, p. 189), it is nonetheless easy for workers to convey more subtle presumptions about a shared spiritual frame of reference. Many practitioners of monotheistic religions like Christianity or Judaism may assume that referring to a personal, transcendent, male deity (“God”) is a nonspecific religious reference. However, these terms and images carry specific cultural connotations that are not shared by Pagans, Wiccans, and members of many other faiths.

Doherty (1999) examined the overlapping domains of clinical, spiritual, and moral issues in therapy and discussed ways to establish which domains are relevant for a client. When it seems appropriate to discuss spirituality, the use of open-ended questions (for example, “Has your spirituality been a resource for you during this difficult time?”) and nonspecific terminology can help to create a more comfortable space for clients of all faiths. Hodge (2001) provided a framework for spiritual assessment that uses this type of open-ended language. Griffith (1999) described how to evoke clients’ images and experiences of the divine without imposing the worker’s (or society’s) definitions.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE
When working with Pagan clients in the area of child welfare services, it is important to bear in mind that Pagans and Witches who become
involved with the child welfare system may be concerned that their religion will be held against them. Cookson (1997) said, "Wiccan parents are perennially fearful that their children may innocently relate stories of holy day celebrations or ritual practices to misunderstanding persons" who might report the parents to social workers or police (p. 727). In one case, the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources removed children from the care of their Wiccan parents, alleging that the couple was planning to kill their children in a Satanic ritual (Coleman, 2004). The conflation of the terms "Witchcraft" and "Satanism," as well as pervasive misinformation surrounding both terms, can create confusion for Child Protective Services (CPS) workers investigating such a case. The topic of Satanism does not fall within the scope of this article, and accurate information on Satanism is difficult to obtain because of the sensationalistic nature of much literature on Satanism. However, it is important to clarify that although some Satanists may identify themselves as "Satanic witches," the tenets of Satanism are clearly distinct from the beliefs of Pagan Witches as described in this article. As described by Cookson (1997), educational materials on Satanic ritual abuse frequently describe practices and symbols that are not exclusive to Satanists, and are common among Pagans, such as magic, Tarot card reading, rituals held in a circle, or use of the pentagram (five-pointed star).

While investigating claims of abuse or neglect, CPS workers may be unsure of how to evaluate the safety of Pagans' ritual tools (such as a knife that is used to direct magical energy). Generally, ritual tools may be assessed in the same manner as other household objects. For example, if a sharp knife is within reach of an unsupervised two-year-old, this presents a safety concern whether it is a kitchen knife on a counter or a magical knife on an altar. However, workers should be aware that it is considered respectful to ask before touching a Witch's ritual tools, as many Witches consider their tools imbued with magical energy.

Social workers may need to help Pagan or Wiccan children in foster care to negotiate boundaries around religion with non-Pagan foster parents. Pagan children should not be subject to evangelism by foster parents or required to attend religious services of another faith against their wishes. Corkran (2005) pointed out that while conflicts can arise when a child's religious practices conflict with those of the foster parents, state authorities and foster parents are still required to make "reasonable efforts" to ensure that a child has free exercise of religion while in foster care. Schatz and Horejsi (1996) described a training module used to educate foster parents and caseworkers about the role of religion in foster parenting.

**CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS**

Social workers who serve youths in schools and other agencies may encounter young people who were raised in Pagan families, or who were raised in other religions but have developed an interest in Paganism, Witchcraft, or Wicca. Young Pagans—whether their spiritual affiliation is by upbringing or by choice—may face harassment or ignorance from peers or institutions. One Pagan family in Tennessee filed a lawsuit against the school district on charges that their daughter had been taunted, ridiculed, and harassed for her beliefs (Lawson, 2003). The harassment allegedly included being beaten up by peers, being called "Satan worshipper" and accused of eating babies, and being repeatedly pressured to participate in Christian activities at the school. Although this is clearly an extreme example, it illustrates the potential need for social workers to help their clients engage in advocacy and education, to ensure a safe and respectful environment. One Pagan advocacy group has published an informational brochure for educators about Pagan students (Dewr, 1998), which may be useful in advocacy efforts.

Youths growing up in Pagan families are likely to have some access to Pagan community resources and to have family and community guidance in their spiritual path. Although they may experience prejudice, they are also likely to have peer support from other Pagan children or youths, who they know through local groups or regional festivals (multiday, large group camping events that bring together Pagans from a variety of traditions). In addition, Pagan parents often develop rituals to help children through life transitions. Starhawk, Baker, and Hill...
(1998) described adolescent rites of passage, as well as rituals to mark other childhood changes. Youths who seek out Paganism and Witchcraft on their own may encounter more difficulties. Teenagers may not know any adult Pagans, and many adult Pagans are wary of teaching teenagers about Paganism, for legal and ethical reasons (Harrow, 1993). In addition, because of a recent media explosion on the topic, many teenagers teach themselves about Witchcraft through books or the Internet (la Ferla, 2000). Young Pagans who do not have contact with a local Pagan community may communicate with other Pagans through online networking sites. Workers should encourage their clients to follow Internet safety guidelines, such as keeping their identity private (by using a pseudonym or omitting personal information) and making careful decisions about real-life meetings with people they have met online.

Some teenagers will be forbidden to practice Witchcraft by their parents. Although social workers may help to educate parents about Witchcraft, in many cases they should help teenagers accept that they may not be able to openly practice their religion while living at home. Harrow (1993) offered suggestions for teenage seekers as to Pagan-related areas of study that they can pursue before they are of age, such as learning about comparative religions and deepening their connection with nature.

A widespread perception exists that teenagers become involved in Witchcraft as a form of rebellion (la Ferla, 2000). Although this may be true for some youths, it is also important to remember that strong interests in religious or spiritual pursuits are commonly seen as a part of teenage development (Ozorak, 1989). Although most teenagers identify with their parents' religious beliefs, a substantial minority may develop different religious beliefs. Ozorak found that 23 percent of a high school-age sample listed a different religious preference than that of their parents, whereas Smith, Faris, Denton, and Regnerus (2003) found that 20.7 percent of their sample stated their religious beliefs were “mostly or very” different from their parents'. As with other religious practices, some youths might take up Pagan spirituality and then drop it after a time; others might engage in it as a lifelong practice. Erikson (1968), who viewed adolescence as a moratorium or grace period in which a youth is not fully committed to one identity, pointed out that this moratorium is not necessarily “consciously experienced” by an adolescent; “the young individual may feel deeply committed and may learn only much later that what he took so seriously was only a period of transition” (p. 158).

While working with youths in such a period of transition, social workers may experience external pressure from parents or family members to guide a young client in a particular direction. A worker may also feel internal pressure on the basis of personal beliefs about Paganism and Witchcraft as a helpful or harmful influence. The social worker's ethical responsibility, as described in the NASW Code of Ethics (2000), is to “respect and promote the right of [their] clients to self-determination” (p.7). Therefore, a worker should support a client in focusing on the client's own identified goals as he or she develops a religious affiliation.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FAMILY PRACTICE

Although Pagan families share many characteristics with other predominantly white, working-class middle-class families (Berger, 1999), they also have several distinctive traits. As Neo-Paganism is a new movement, almost all Pagans and Witches were raised in other religions, and they may have conflicts with their families of origin over their choice to practice Paganism. In addition, many Pagans are in interfaith relationships; Berger et al. (2003) found that only 51.4 percent of those who gave information about their partner's religious faith indicated that their partner shared their spiritual orientation. Some research (for example, Joanides, Mayhew, & Mamalakis, 2002) has indicated that interfaith couples may face increased conflict because of religious disagreements; other researchers (Heller & Wood, 2000) have not found increased conflict or decreased intimacy in interfaith couples. Social workers may find it important to examine the role of religious differences for interfaith client families.

In one study of Pagans (Berger et al., 2003), 70 percent of parents surveyed were encouraging their children to follow a Neo-Pagan path; however, the authors of this study commented that the lack of a formal infrastructure in the community can make religious education for children difficult to organize. Pagans and Witches may also struggle with wanting to share their faith with their children and, at the same time, supporting their children in “following their own spiritual interests” (Berger, 1999) rather than being forced into a particular spiritual path. In resolving this dilemma, different families may choose
to provide different levels of exposure to Paganism for their children.

As a final point, Pagan families possess a valuable resource for growth, change, and healing: the use of ritual for therapeutic purposes. There is some literature on the use of ritual in therapy (see, for example, Bewley, 1995; Davis, 2000; Perlstein, 2001). A helpful resource for working with families is Imber-Black, Roberts, and Whiting's (2003) collection, which addresses specifically the use of ritual in family therapy. The authors offer considerations for helping families to develop rituals, as well as suggestions on how to incorporate ritual into family therapy. These methods are likely to resonate comfortably with Pagans, who commonly use rituals and magic to create psychological and interpersonal changes in their lives.

**Case Example**

Names and details in this case example have been changed to protect confidentiality. For three months, I worked in a school setting with Heather, an 11-year-old girl whose stepmother was Wiccan. Although spirituality was not a primary focus of my work with Heather, our discussions of spirituality helped to build a therapeutic relationship and develop trust, and her story offers a helpful illustration of several points common to Pagan families.

First, Heather, like many Pagan children, did not directly disclose her religion to me. However, my familiarity with Pagan culture and with Pagan beliefs and practices helped me to identify her spirituality; I guessed that she might be part of a Pagan family on the basis of cues she gave. For example, when a classmate made negative comments about witches, she told him, "Witches are healers"; she always wore a necklace with a Celtic symbol; and, when annoyed, she would sometimes sigh, "Oh, Goddess!" In addition, I knew that she attended a Unitarian church, a denomination that is often welcoming to Pagans as well as those of other faiths.

One day, as I was asking about her father and stepmother's marriage, Heather told me, "Actually it was a 'handfasting'; that's the name for marriage in my stepmother's religion." I asked if her stepmother was Wiccan. She looked up at me, astonished, and asked, "How did you know?" Her face showed obvious relief that I was familiar with Wicca. She had been hesitant to tell me directly because she had met with negative reactions at school in the past when she said that she practiced Witchcraft. In addition, Heather's stepmother, like many Pagan parents, had cautioned her not to be too open about their religion.

Heather's stepmother Gwynne was in an interfaith relationship with Heather's father; their family attended a Unitarian church, which provided common ground for them to experience spirituality as a family despite different primary affiliations. Heather and her sister were exposed to Wicca as well as to other faiths (through the Unitarian church) and had been told that when they turned 16, they would each be able to decide whether they wanted to study Wicca further. This was their parents' solution to the dilemma of the difference in religious faiths and a way to teach children about Paganism without forcing it on them.

In my work with Heather, I primarily provided therapeutic support in a classroom setting, with only occasional individual and family work. As I came to know Heather, I found out not only that her family identified as Wiccan, but also that spirituality was very important to her. If I had worked with her over a longer period of time or in a different setting, I would have begun to explore further the ways in which her spirituality could be a resource for her. As an example, when conflicts arose in the classroom, Heather became visibly nervous and upset. In our first individual session, Heather was able to identify that these situations triggered memories of previous violence she had experienced. Together, Heather and I worked out a plan in which she could ask to leave the room when her memories were triggered. If I had known more about her spirituality at the time she and I developed this plan, I might have asked her whether she had any spiritual practices that might help her to calm herself when she went outside the classroom.

One example of such a practice might be "grounding," a visualization exercise in which a person focuses on connection with the earth, which many Pagans use to release excessive emotional energy. (Starhawk and colleagues [1998] offered a child's version and an adult version of a common grounding visualization, in which the person imagines himself or herself as a tree whose roots extend to the earth.) I might have suggested that Heather practice this technique with Gwynne; this would have been a positive way to strengthen her relationship with her stepmother and to build coping skills in handling her own anxiety. (See Table 1 for recommended guidelines for spiritually sensitive spirituality.)
practice with a Pagan population that are based on the areas under discussion in this article.)

**CONCLUSION**

This article has provided an overview of the beliefs, practices, and group characteristics of children and youths who identify as Pagans, Wiccans, and Witches. Social workers who wish to learn more about this growing population are encouraged to consult the references provided and increase their own familiarity with Paganism. In addition, this article may serve as an invitation for future study in this area. Possible topics for research include the use of ritual in clinical practice with Pagan families, the experiences of youths raised as Pagans as compared with those of youths who choose a Pagan path, and the role of spirituality in interfaith families. Social work researchers may want to consider interdisciplinary collaborations with researchers from other fields (for example, sociology) who are studying Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft.

I hope that, in addition to educating social workers about some of the needs and characteristics of this specific population, this article contributes to the culturally sensitive integration of spirituality into social work practice. For those clients who consider spirituality an important part of their lives and who wish to discuss this topic in a social work setting, it is important that social workers include spiritual and religious considerations in a respectful way.

**REFERENCES**


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**Table 1: Guidelines for Practice with Pagan Youths and Families**

1. Use neutral language or concepts when opening up a discussion of spirituality; use open-ended questions to elicit the client's own spiritual framework.
2. Use the client's own words in identifying his or her spirituality, for example, "Pagan," "Druid," "Wiccan."
3. Become familiar with basic terms and practices associated with Paganism and Wicca.
4. Watch for subtle cues indicating Pagan identity, while leaving room for direct disclosure.
5. Monitor internal and external pressures to encourage seeking clients in one direction or another; maintain focus on the client's expressed goals.
6. Learn how teenage and adult clients' faiths in their families of origin relate to their current experiences.
7. Ask families about the extent to which children are involved in the parents' religious practice.
8. Help interfaith couples to clarify how religious differences affect their family's functioning.
9. Support families in developing informal support systems and connecting with other Pagan families.
10. Ask about spiritual practices and rituals that may help clients in dealing with the presenting issue.


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