

Twelve Tribes community: NSPCC demands police inquiry into Christian sect that canes children

The children's charity calls on police to examine the activities of the community at Stentwood Farm near Honiton

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SUNDAY 29 SEPTEMBER 2013



The NSPCC has called for an investigation into the practises of a controversial Christian sect after an *Independent* investigation revealed allegations of physical child abuse.

The children's charity is calling on Devon County Council and Devon and Cornwall Police to examine the activities of the Twelve Tribes community at Stentwood Farm near Honiton, after the group defended its right to chastise its children with a willow cane in *The Independent* earlier this month.

A former member of the sect, a worldwide movement founded 40 years ago in the US, has now come forward with allegations of widespread physical child abuse and use of the willow cane at the Devon farm. It has also emerged that a complaint about the community was made by a woman claiming to be a former member in 2005 and was investigated by local authorities.

The call from the NSPCC comes after authorities in Germany took 40 children at the Twelve Tribes community in Bavaria away from their parents and placed them in foster homes after a journalist filmed six children being beaten with a total of 83 strokes of the cane.

“Following the *Independent* story we have liaised with Devon County Council’s children’s services to... ensure that an appropriate assessment of the concerns are undertaken,” said Phillip Noyes, director of strategy and development at the NSPCC.

Vicki, who says she is a former member of the community and spent six months at Stentwood Farm and did not want to reveal her full name, told *The Independent*: “There wasn’t a day that went by while I was there that children weren’t beaten with the rod. I beat my own son because that is what the group taught me to do.”

Children were left “black and blue” according to Vicki, and parents were told by community elders that children had “to bend over” and be “hit on the bare bottom with the stick”. She added later: “You couldn’t do it without leaving stripes.”

Vicki says that after leaving the community she made a complaint to Devon County Council in February 2005. Her complaint included allegations of child circumcision and home births carried out without medical supervision. Devon and Cornwall Police confirmed the allegations had been investigated but “no criminal proceedings were started against any individual”.

Devon County Council refused to comment on whether an investigation would be carried out in light of *The Independent*’s investigation, but a spokesman for Devon and Cornwall Police said: “We can confirm that Devon and Cornwall Police and Devon County Council are working together to thoroughly review the recent information received about the welfare of children in the Honiton area.”

The Independent has also seen a document which purports to be a child training manual apparently produced by the sect. It states: “Parents are to chastise by using a rod or balloon stick that can cause stripes... marks like those left by a whip.”

The 2004 Children’s Act, which came into force in January 2005, clarified the defence of reasonable chastisement for parents who are charged with assault occasioning actual bodily harm, wounding or grievous bodily harm, or cruelty to a child. Any hitting that causes bruising, swelling, cuts, grazes or scratches is punishable with up to five years in jail.

The Twelve Tribes sect refused to comment for this article but Jonathan Stagg, an elder in the Honiton community, previously said it was the group’s “fundamental right” to use the willow cane and that the community was “still in the realm of English law”.

It has also emerged that the sect, which believes homosexual behaviour is immoral and has been accused of anti-Semitism, runs Common Ground, a popular meeting point and café which has operated at Glastonbury Festival as recently as 2011. Vicki alleges the café was an important revenue stream for the sect and a source of new members. A Glastonbury Festival spokesman refused to comment and the group is still included on the festival’s website.

However, *The Independent* understands the group, which rents a space from organisers at the Somerset site, is now unlikely to return to the festival in 2014.

The group's Common Loaf bakery, which is run from Stentwood Farm, also operates at numerous farmers' markets in the region and ran a stall at the Devon County Show this year.

The NSPCC spokesman added: "We're grateful to *The Independent* for highlighting this issue and bringing it to our attention. Caning of children or the threat of caning is a completely unacceptable method of disciplinary action to take with any child."

Case study: 'You are taught to hit them on the bare bottom'

Vicki says she had been in contact with the Twelve Tribes community near Honiton for about a year and a half before she made the decision to move to Stentwood Farm with her seven-year-old son in 2004. Looking back, she regrets the decision.

"Those kids are beaten for anything and everything; they are taught to be 100 per cent obedient. If that means a child is told to sit still and they move then, by the community's standard you then have to take that child out and beat it," she said.

"I beat my own son as that's what I was taught to do by the community elders. You don't know this when you join, but you are taught to hit them on the bare bottom with the stick... it's their doctrine". Vicki said a boy with autism "got it worse than anybody else". She said the group beat their children to "cleanse" their "conscience of the sin of disobedience".

Vicki claims she left the group after six months and now considers it a "cult". When she told them of her reservations, she said, "they flew off the handle at me and told me I was full of demons. I came to realise this isn't how Jesus would behave if someone came to him saying they were low and that the Twelve Tribes aren't really Christian at all".

Vicki says she left the sect after smuggling a phone into her room and calling for a friend to collect her. She now lives in the north of England and attends a mainstream church.