

Social workers not protecting youngsters from their parents

FROM PAGE ONE

Abused children at risk

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Mothers convicted of child abuse have been allowed custody of children previously removed from home by court order, only to hurt the youngsters again.

In February this year five-year-old Lee Man-yea drowned on a visit to her mother, Lee Sau-ping, who was later charged with her murder.

Against Child Abuse director Priscilla Lui said social workers often underestimated risks and prolonged a child's suffering.

Care and protection orders created a false sense of security.

"The poor child is left with nobody to protect him because the main caregiver, being the abuser, is not in a position to protect ... yet the official party who is supposed to oversee the care order is not really intensively supervising the relevant parties or monitoring the situation."

How regular visits are, and how much counselling is offered, may depend on the social workers. But there is now evidence that some fail to take their role as child protection workers seriously.

Guardians of abused children placed under the department's care had approached Against Child Abuse for help.

Ms Lui said the department was often reluctant to define a case as child abuse, as is required before a child can be put under a care and protection order.

University of Hong Kong Social Work and Social Administration Department lecturer Cecilia Chan said social workers were each burdened on average with 65 cases, which often meant assessments were rushed and counselling limited.

With only one family aid worker for each family service centre, which catered for 300 people, parents were not receiving the help they needed, she said.

By Fiona Holland

CASES of serious abuse of children under the care of the Social Welfare Department prove social workers are failing to protect youngsters from their parents.

Vicious attacks on several chronically abused children are prompting demands for the government to act more resolutely in the victims' interests.

Some children continue to endure physical violence because social workers do not remove them from danger — and are even sending them back to their tormentors.

The names of the children are being withheld upon request from social workers.

In one of two cases uncovered by *The Hongkong Standard*, a boy, now aged eight, was returned twice to his mentally handicapped mother after being taken from her at birth. Upon their reunion she embarked on a reign of abuse.

As a result, the boy was hospitalised and his mother was convicted of child abuse. The government then returned the boy to his mother. Now, two years later, the child is severely psychiatrically disturbed and could be confined to a mental institution for life because of the beatings he received from his own mother.

In another horror story a 17-year-old girl was given up

Editorial: Page 12

to a private agency by her distraught father so she could be freed from her mother's beatings, which had gone on for 10 years.

She finally made it to the safety of a small group home after more than a decade of beatings by her mother — violence the Social Welfare Department refuses to define as child abuse. Her beatings have been dismissed as a case of harsh discipline.

She now fears that her mother might trace her whereabouts and attack her again.

A "stop child abuse" lobby group yesterday demanded that the government guard innocent youngsters under nominal Social Welfare custody from sustained attacks.

More than 2,443 children are cared for and protected under the Protection of Children and Juveniles Ordinance.

But some of these children, subjected to serious and prolonged physical violence continue to be abused in spite of intervention by the Social Welfare Department's Child Protective Services unit.

Mothers convicted of abuse have been given custody of children removed the home by court order, only to hurt the youngsters again.

Continued Page 2