

LCQ1: Prevention and early identification of child abuse cases

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Pierre Chan and a reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (May 12):

Question:

Recently, a court case in which a five-year-old girl died of being abused has aroused wide public concern about the issue of child abuse. A child protection organisation pointed out that last year, due to the epidemic, schools suspended classes on a number of occasions and quite a number of parents worked from home or lost their jobs; as such, children and parents spent more time together, resulting in more conflicts between them and an increase in the number of assistance-seeking cases about child abuse. On the other hand, during class suspension periods, some parents were unable to stay home to take care of their young children, resulting in an increase in child neglect cases. Regarding prevention and early identification of child abuse cases, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will require all school-based social workers, school principals and teachers (especially members of School Crisis Management Teams) to receive more comprehensive training (e.g. a course of a duration of not less than three days) on child protection and identification of child abuse cases, so as to help them identify and intervene in child abuse cases at an early stage;

(2) as currently the epidemic has not been brought under complete control and schools have not fully resumed classes, of the measures put in place to step up child care support for parents or their relatives, so as to reduce child abuse incidents stemming from disciplining children and neglect; and

(3) of the current considerations based on which policies on school-based social workers (including the manpower level) are formulated; whether it will, in the light of the differences between the various types of education institutions (including kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, and special schools) in terms of their nature and location (e.g. families in new towns needing more support), suitably increase the manpower of school-based social workers in the relevant education institutions, so as to help identify child abuse cases at an early stage?

Reply:

President,

At present, there are a number of legislation in place that protect children from harm and abuse. They include the Offences against the Person Ordinance (Cap. 212), the Crimes Ordinance (Cap. 200), the Prevention of

Child Pornography Ordinance (Cap. 579) and the Protection of Children and Juveniles Ordinance (Cap. 213). In particular, the Offences against the Person Ordinance provides that ill-treatment or neglect by those in charge of children is a criminal offence. Besides, the Government has implemented a number of measures in recent years to enhance the capability of school personnel in early identification of and timely support for suspected victims of child abuse.

In consultation with the Education Bureau (EDB), my reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) Front-line professionals (including social workers, teaching professionals, police officers, government counsels, medical professionals and healthcare personnel) play a crucial role in the early identification of suspected victims of child abuse. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) has organised on regular basis talks and skills training courses to strengthen the capability of these professionals in various aspects, such as identifying suspected child abuse cases at an earlier stage, conducting risk assessment, taking child protection actions and providing post-trauma counselling.

In recent years, the EDB has stepped up training for school personnel on identification of child abuse victims including organising annual briefings and seminars jointly with the SWD and the Hong Kong Police Force on handling child abuse cases, with a view to enhancing the capability and skills of principals, teachers and school social workers (SSWs) in handling child abuse cases. Besides, the EDB has also incorporated relevant elements or themes into training courses for school guidance personnel, with a view to enhancing the capability of school personnel holding different positions in early identification, intervention and support for suspected victims of child abuse.

(2) Since the outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019, the EDB has been maintaining a close liaison with the school sector. During class suspension or before full resumption of classes, schools are required to remain open for students whose families are not able to take care of them under the circumstances. In addition to keeping contacts with students through telephone calls and online means, SSWs also provide timely counselling to students in need through interviews or visits. The EDB has also reminded schools specifically that SSWs should constantly pay attention to students involved in cases of prolonged absence from schools, families lacking support and suspected or reported child abuse, and that they should handle high-risk cases in accordance with the established procedures.

In addition, to support children and families in need during the pandemic, the After School Care Programme centres for primary school students have since December 2, 2020 provided non-face-to-face services through online media, mobile applications and telephone calls when the centres are not open to the public. These centres are also able to continue to provide face-to-face service to children with special needs.

(3) The EDB has implemented the policy of "one SSW for each school" in primary schools since the 2018/19 school year, under which public sector

primary schools may, having regard to their own circumstances, employ at least one school-based registered graduate social worker with professional qualifications. As for special schools, the EDB has enhanced the provision of SSWs in aided special schools since the 2018/19 school year. Special schools with a capacity of 60 or less are provided with one SSW and subsequently 0.5 SSW for every 30 students so that each special school are provided with one or more SSWs.

The SWD has implemented the policy of "one SSW for each school" in secondary schools since the 2000/01 school year, under which SSW service is provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Additional resources have been deployed since the 2019/20 school year to implement the measure of "two SSWs for each school" in more than 460 secondary schools across the territory. Besides, for early identification of and timely support for pre-primary children and their families with welfare needs, the SWD launched a three-year pilot scheme in the 2018/19 school year to provide SSW service in phases for more than 700 subsidised/aided pre-primary institutions (PPIs) (including aided child care centres (CCCs), kindergartens (KGs) and KG-cum-CCCs) across the territory. The pilot scheme is implemented by social work teams operated by NGOs, with each team having eight social workers providing service for not more than 16 PPIs. The Government has commissioned a university to conduct an evaluation study on the pilot scheme so as to shed light on the way forward of the service.