

Motion 1

The government should formulate more effective policies to protect children from being left unattended

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Introduction

“Leaving children unattended invites endless troubles in future”. Children who are left alone in any places without the attention of adults are referred to as “children left unattended”. According to Article 19 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* of the United Nations, the society shall protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment.

The problem of leaving children unattended is deteriorating day by day, and is affecting the physical and mental health of children. We should never let such thing happen. Therefore, we urge the government to formulate more effective policies to protect children from being left unattended.

Overview of the current situation

From time to time we read in the news accidents involving children being left unattended, and sometimes these accidents resulted in death of the children. The actual number of children left unattended is much higher than that we know of. The General Household Survey conducted in 1997 revealed that about 110,000 children aged below 12 had been left unattended at home once or more. Statistics of the Social Welfare Department also show that cases of child neglect rose from 22 in 1996 to 79 in January to September 2009. A significant number of these cases involved children being left unattended.

There are various reasons for parents to leave their children unattended. These may be going to work or shopping, or having some errands to attend to. We have successfully interviewed 1,085 students from Primary 3 to Secondary 2 by questionnaire. About 70% of them said they had been left unattended before, and over 60% were left unattended because their parents had to go to work or shopping. It was also found that home is the most common place where children are left unattended (over 80%). This phenomenon is very common in Hong Kong because parents often under-estimate the need of their children and the potential danger of leaving them unattended while over-estimating the safety at home and the ability of their children to take care of themselves.

Leaving children unattended will have adverse effects on the physical and mental state of children. These may include feeling a sense of insecurity, having no interest in anything, extreme quietness and nervousness. Children who had been injured when being left unattended might even suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. About 70% of the respondents in our survey expressed that they had negative emotions when being left unattended. According to the findings of a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Christian Service in 2008, children of younger age are much more fearful about being left unattended at home. Besides, leaving children unattended is damaging to the parent-child relationship. These children tend to trust their parents less. The increasing number of child injuries and even deaths resulting from being left unattended as reported in the media reflects the seriousness of the problem which demands immediate actions.

At present childcare services available in Hong Kong include occasional childcare services, afterschool childcare services and services operated under the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project (NSCCP). They are run by organizations such as the Boy's & Girls' Clubs

Association of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Society for the Protection of Children, and are available in most districts in Hong Kong. These services, operated during different hours between 7 am and 11 pm, are targeted for children aged 0-12. They cost from a few hundred dollars to several thousand a month. Currently only 11 social service agencies are offering NSCCP services, which, apparently, are insufficient to meet the needs. NSCCP provides childcare services for children aged 0-6 at the babysitters' home; and for children aged 3-6, they could stay in the agencies' centers where they will be looked after by the centre staff, thus, are protected from being left unattended.

Yet, few parents are aware of these services as government publicity is minimal. In 2008 the Democratic Party conducted a questionnaire survey on occasional childcare services in which 940 citizens were interviewed. Findings show 75% of the respondents do not know whether there are organizations offering childcare services in their neighbourhood, and 53% of them find childcare services offered in their neighbourhood insufficient in varieties and quantity. Recent media reports also point to the ignorance of parents about the seriousness of the problem. This inadequate sense of crisis, coupled with a generally alienated neighbourhood, led to frequent accidents where children were left unattended by their parents.

Suggestions

(I) Information and statistics

In order to solve the problem of leaving children unattended in an effectively and comprehensive manner, it is crucial to understand the geographical distribution of the needs, the seriousness of the problem, and the effectiveness of current deployment of resources. Since the release of the aforesaid Special Topics Report of the General Household Survey in 1997, no comprehensive surveys of the kind have been conducted for more than a decade. We would like to see the government carry out regular surveys on child-related issues (including the issue of leaving children unattended) consistently as preparation to hammer out feasible solutions for the issues. Besides, we propose that a Children and Families Database be set up to maintain and manage the relevant information systematically to facilitate government agencies, policy makers and related organizations in their formulation and design of long-term policies and specific services.

(II) Publicity and education

People in the community are in general ignorant about the problem of leaving children unattended. Nor do most of them appreciate the importance of taking proper care of children. We therefore suggest that the first place to deal with the issue is to educate the public, children and parents, as well as families with newborn babies.

(1) Educating the public

Leaving children unattended could result in serious accidents and may even cause troubles to the neighborhood. The government should therefore step up efforts in educating the public and arousing in them a sense of crisis about the problem, explaining clearly to them the seriousness and danger of leaving children unattended, and raising public concern of the issue. Besides, the government should propagate the importance of neighbourhood support in the community through various channels, and further promoting the childcare services provided by different organizations.

(2) Introducing the concepts of self-protection and home safety in the curricular in kindergartens and primary schools

In our opinion, the government should begin the education for children in the formal curricular. Children could be taught about the potential danger of being left unattended, and the basic knowledge on home safety and the skills to deal with emergencies, so that their ability to protect themselves can be strengthened. The government should also

introduce to children the concept of child protection and the adverse effects of being left unattended. By doing so, we will be able to help our young people to grow into responsible adults, preventing them from repeating the same mistake, thus stopping the deterioration of the problem.

(3) Strengthening education for families with newborn babies

We should respect and support the advent of every newborn child by ensuring that their basic living standards and human rights are well protected. Therefore, we suggest educating families with new born babies the importance of providing their children a safe environment to grow up and the danger of leaving children unattended.

(4) Strengthening education for parents

Presently parents lack adequate understanding about the risks of leaving children unattended and are unaware of the various childcare services available. We suggest organizing education programmes for parents on an ongoing basis. These programmes can have a two-fold objective: first, to instill in parents a proper attitude about childcare so as to reinforce their sense of responsibility as parents; and second, to inform them the relevant services available so that they will not leave their children unattended due to lack of knowledge about these services. Parent education could also help parents to understand the needs of their children at different stages of growth.

(III) Services

Although childcare services are available in different districts across Hong Kong, it does not prevent children from being left unattended. To resolve the problem, it is necessary for the government to join hands with non-government organizations (NGOs) to promote the services in a more proactive manner.

(1) Set up more service centres for occasional childcare services and extend the operating hours

At present the government is subsidizing daytime childcare services, occasional childcare services, afterschool childcare services and extended service hours provided by some NGOs. Most of the occasional childcare services are available from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm. Parents having to work in night-shift and in irregular hours are left with no choice but to leave their children at home, thus exposing their children to potential danger. We suggest the government introduce 24-hour occasional childcare services and extend the operating hours of the existing service centres to 12:00 am.

(2) Review the current charges for childcare services and increase the quotas for free afterschool childcare services

The government is providing approximately 5000 free or half-priced childcare service places for children aged above 6. This is obviously far insufficient to satisfy the actual need. According to the figures provided by the Society for Community Organization in 2008, children in need of the services exceed 10,000. In our opinion, the government should consider lowering the application criteria for free childcare services, and introduce relevant measures to make the charges more affordable.

(3) Study the possibility of providing Occasional Childcare Service in workplace

To put the heart of parents having to work long hours at ease while preventing children from being left unattended, we propose that government departments, non-profit organizations and private enterprises may consider assigning areas in the workplace to provide occasional childcare services for employees. The government could encourage different organizations and enterprises to provide such services to ensure children's safety by giving subsidies.

(IV) Reinforcing the community network

The government should promote the creation of a Neighbourhood Support Network in every district to support families in need, and propagate the spirit of neighbourhood care in the community. In addition, the government may take reference of the Community Nannies Support System in Taiwan, and put in place a similar registry of “community nannies” to provide parents with useful information on childcare help available in the neighbourhood, and help raise the quality of childcare services, thus reducing the chance of children being left unattended.

(V) Legislation

Laws are sets of social norms that reflect the moral standards set out collectively by the government and its people. They have the functions of educating the people and deterring unacceptable behaviours.

With respect to the issue of leaving children unattended, the *Offences against the Person Ordinance* (Cap 212) stipulated that “if any person over the age of 16 who has the custody, charge or care of any child under that age willfully assaults, ill-treats, neglects, abandons or exposes such child and causes harm to him, such person shall be guilty of a criminal offence”.

Yet, the aforesaid provision alone does not adequately protect our children from being left unattended. As more and more accidents are happening as a result of children being left unattended, we propose that the government should –

- (1) consider enacting a law to forbid people from leaving children unattended as soon as possible, and in the course of drafting the law, conduct public consultations to solicit views from all sectors of the society.
- (2) take reference of the practice in New Zealand and four states in the US¹, where the definition of “being left unattended”, the conditions under which children may be left unattended (e.g. age limit above which children may be left unattended), and the punishments for the offence are clearly set out in the law. With such a law in place, children will be protected while parents will be given clear guidelines on how to take care of their children, avoiding any unintentional breach of the law.
- (3) order parents breaching the law to attend parent education programmes as one of the penalties, so as to improve their knowledge on childcare.

Enacting a law to prohibit anyone leaving children unattended aims to raise public awareness of child protection, promote positive values about proper childcare to the public, and deter people from leaving children unattended. The law will give better legal protection for children and help parents avoid falling into legal loopholes. Yet, in the gradual enforcement of the law, the government should take into account the actual circumstances, allowing grace period for the parents or child carers as the legislation should have the ultimate benefits of children at heart.

Conclusion

For years various organizations have been advocating the formulation of more effective policies to tackle the problem of leaving children unattended. And continuous occurrence of incidents of the kind, often resulted in injuries or even casualties, has made the cause even more pressing. All along the government has been responding to the problem in a piecemeal manner whenever an accident happened. This is totally unacceptable. To this end, our group

would like to urge the government to take a proactive approach to address the problem in order to secure the safety and rights of children. In this motion, we put forward recommendations in five aspects, namely, information and statistics, publicity and education, services, reinforcing the community network, and legislation.

Note ¹ : Georgia, Illinois, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

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