




Go to CS Voice Index 

Issue 019
2017 May

Views

Protect Children at Risk Support Distressed Families

In September 2017 the government will implement free early childhood education for children aged 3 to 6. That said it will be formally included in the education subvention scheme. However, it only applies to children of half-day mode, for whole day and long whole day mode, parents still have to pay some school fees. It is still quite far away from diversified free education. Hong Kong needs a comprehensive review and planning on early childhood education: little has been done to support education and caring for children aged 0 to 3; the government fails to come up with detailed planning and development for special pre-school education; the lack of accurate information on parenting and necessary space for educational parenting activities; parents are running into snags amidst the piecemeal and other so-called parenting information.

However, there are many difficulties and service gaps in offering support to these children at risk. They are: (1) acute shortage of residential places for infants and children and cannot offer timely protection to them, even children of some confirmed abuse cases can only stay in hospital until there are emergency places available. (2) Over 30% of children who have traumatic experiences and 40% of others who have been assessed with special needs would be admitted to Small Group Homes or Children's homes, however, as frontline carers are not professional staff, they are facing much pressure in taking care of these children and somehow affect the service quality. (3) There is a growing trend for children to stay longer in residential service, in some cases, children who are over 10 years old may have already been living with 7 to 8 foster families and small group homes and gradually getting distrustful towards people. Some children wished to live with their own families, regrettably, they had not been satisfied. (4) Sometimes due to the complexity of the family situations (no stable accommodation or moving to other service boundaries) and division of labour among districts, such cases have to undergo referral to different service units. Social worker who takes up the case would have to study it all over and it takes time to establish relationship, sometimes, information of the case might be lost and would affect the service provided to both children and families. (5) Professionals of various disciplines are holding different standards on follow up plan or parenting skills of parents, and thus stagnation occur in long-term welfare planning. It is therefore necessary to establish an objective indicator or mechanism in cross-disciplinary collaboration.

In order to protect children at risk and support families effectively, we urge the departments concerned to improve the existing service planning, system and legislation such as:

1. Raise awareness towards child abuse and conduct comprehensive review

The Social Welfare Department (SWD) is conducting a 3-year review on "The Procedures for Handling Child Abuse Cases" and there will be consultation in phases, taking this opportunity, it is suggested to explore the following areas for improvement as well: public education on protection for children, legislation, policies, mechanisms, professional assessments and data, etc. For example, to establish a standard for the public and public education on the awareness on child abuse and protection of children; to adjust the focus and direction of the multi-disciplinary case conferences; to develop professionalism and crisis assessment tools and indicators for local use.

2. Review residential child care service and design long term service planning

In order to provide timely service for high-risk children and families, sufficient emergency places is very important. It is necessary to increase provision of appropriate and emergency services for infants and children. However, the existing residential service has long been under shortage of manpower and pressure on caring, the government must conduct comprehensive review and service planning to enhance the service. These measures include: to improve the manpower and caring ratio and its environmental facilities, to enhance professionalism of frontline caring staff, to develop new service model to handle complicated cases, and to strengthen foster care service, etc.

3. Develop an integrated data bank on children at risk to get hold of these children and their families' situation

It is suggested that SWD should compile existing information on children using residential service into an integrated data bank so that social workers can access to these data and get hold of their situations. In addition, it is also necessary to review and enhance the existing reporting procedure of child abuse cases to SWD to maximise the function of data bank for social workers to understand the development of children to devise better service planning. The development of an integrated data bank on children at risk must be done in the long run.

4. Establish a Permanency Planning Committee and work out objective assessment tools

It is suggested to borrow overseas experiences to enhance the awareness and importance of long term welfare planning on children and establish a Permanency Planning Committee (Note 1) to include independent persons who are familiar with children rights and welfare services, officials of SWD and senior figures of NGOs, responsible case workers and those who work closely with children to monitor and review its implementation and make recommendation on children who would stay on a long term basis in residential setting. Furthermore, the government could make references to the Permanency Planning Guidelines (Note 2) of New South Wales to plan, implement and assess its related indicator together with the sector. Its contents should include the relevant legislation requirement, division of labour and responsibilities of all parties concerned, work out a long term welfare planning procedure and practical tools (such as guidelines on decision to reunion, guidelines on frequency of contact between child and family, observation on child and parent behavior and assessment checklist etc.) so that the sector could have a consistent method and standard to work towards the goal for ultimate well-being of children.

5. Legislation on basic children welfare

Under the present legal system, if a parent cannot take care of his child, basically there is no consequence if it does not concern abuse or negligence. While we emphasise on parents' rights, we shall at the same time focus our attention on parents' responsibility to protect his child's basic welfare and rights. We suggest the government to take reference from Children's Act 1989 of the United Kingdom to establish a welfare checklist (note 3) for our children. It enables parents to recognise their responsibility to protect their children's basic welfare and on the other hand, when a parent chooses not to fulfil his responsibility to protect the basic welfare of his child, the court has the right to review whether or not to deprive his right as parent and explore other way out for the child.

Note 1 :
Permanency Planning Committee in North Dakota USA:
http://www.nd.gov/dns/policymanuals/62405/Content/Archive%20Documents/624_05_15_75_mi3206.htm

Note 2 :
http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/322246/permplanning_guidelines.pdf

Note 3 :
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/1