

Proper care for children in care

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DURING THE past few weeks, a series of abuses in children's homes has been given much attention in the Hebrew press. As a result of this publicity and of a recent report about certain Israeli institutions where conditions are particularly poor (the Kadman Report, October 1987), the Knesset Labour and Social Affairs Committee has begun meeting to discuss the situation.

One is likely to receive the impression that all children's institutions are functioning poorly and are harmful for children. This is not the case. Israel has a long tradition of residential group care which began well before the state was founded. Therefore, group care is accepted and the children are not stigmatized as in many countries. The quality of most of the homes is adequate, sometimes excellent.

The percentage of young people in residential care in Israel is among the highest in the world. Although exact figures are not known, due to multiple organizations and a lack of coordination, there are over 50,000 youngsters in group care in Israel. In Holland there are 24,000 in group care for a 14 million population, and in the United States less than 100,000 are in group care out of 220 million.

It is our hope that the present wave of publicity about children's institutions and the discussion in the Knesset committee will be the beginning of some constructive changes. There are some suggestions we would like to propose.

At present, there is no centrally coordinated placement policy on services for children and youth. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is by law responsible for licensing and supervising all residential care. However, with all the good will in the world they are unable to fulfil their mandate with only 11 national inspectors for well over 300 institutions. The institutions are under the auspices of many organizations and governmental bodies including the Youth Aliya department of the Jewish Agency, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and various voluntary bodies. We urge that a permanent advisory committee, meeting regu-

larly, be appointed by the Social Welfare Committee of the Knesset with representatives from each of these major organizations and governmental bodies. This could be the start of some coordination of all the different work and policies.

The last decade has seen an emphasis on community services for children at the expense of budgets for child placement in residential facilities (boarding schools, for instance). This is true in all sectors except the Orthodox, where yeshivot are actively recruiting even young children from families in development towns.

THE OPTIONS available in Israel for child placement at present are somewhat limited. Foster family care has not been allocated sufficient financial and manpower resources to develop and expand. A unique placement potential in Israel are the kibbutzim. The Institute for Education of Israeli Children (Hamifal LeHachsharat Yaldei Yisrael), which is subsidized by the Ministry of Education, has successfully placed individual young children for many years in kibbutz settings. More manpower and resources would help to expand this useful option where children can remain permanently as productive members of society. Another option widely utilized by the "Mifal" is the family group home unit, with a married couple living with the children. Children are cared for in groups of up to 11 children.

Siblings need not be separated here. Keeping siblings together can be a source of much comfort and support for children living away from home. But only 620 children live in these homes. In most children's homes supported by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs the groups are much larger. Usually there are up to 30 children in a group with only two staff members. When there are such large numbers of children to care for and control it

is no wonder that stories of abuse are reaching the headlines.

In spite of the large number of children in residential group care in Israel, there are not enough places for children with behavioural problems or those in need of special attention. These children are not accepted in most institutions and over 400 are in private institutions which are now in dire financial straits. The monthly budget they receive for each child is inadequate for even the most elementary needs, and each year there are further cut-backs. We recommend that private institutions worthy of support be made into semi-public bodies and be given adequate funding. Those which are not, should be closed. There are not enough placement facilities for Arab children with special needs. And disturbed Arab adolescents are even sent to prison now because no institution (reformatory) exists for them.

Youth Aliya, with its 16,000 Jewish youngsters in dormitory care, is now entering a new phase of its development. In the early 1970s the youth villages of Youth Aliya were populated by socially disadvantaged adolescents. It was believed that separating them from their families and their former community and exposing them to the "powerful environment" of the youth village offered them a better chance to change and improve their academic performance. This became Youth Aliya's new goal, just as integrating new immigrant youth into Israeli society had been its previous goal. A growing number of Youth Aliya facilities are now more open settings. Youth Aliya's place in Israeli society has been under discussion for some time. We regard the fact that many Youth Aliya facilities are now turning towards the community as a positive development.

THIS RAISES an extremely important issue. Child and youth placement in Israel is not regionally oriented. Children from the south are often placed in Galilee, and children from the north can find themselves in Jerusalem. For parents and for the children this situation is a serious obstacle to contact. Many re-

search studies have confirmed the significance of such contact for the well-being of children living away from home. We recommend that all placement in the future be made on a regional basis. Each region should assess its needs according to its child population, and its present resources. These resources should then be pooled and made available for the children of the region.

As we have said, Israel has many children in residential institutions. Some are thriving and some have, unfortunately, been abused. There should be resources available to children, parents and staff who have serious complaints. We recommend that a procedure for such complaints be available to every child, parent or guardian at the time of placement. In the meantime, an office for a special child placement ombudsman has been established by the Council for the Child in Placement. A retired juvenile court judge started this work recently (Avraham Ben-Hador, 8 Kerem Hayesod Street, Jerusalem).

A general ombudsman for children and youth has been in operation for a year on an experimental

basis (Dr. Menahem Horovitz, Jerusalem Children's Council, Beit Eini, 111 Rehov Agrippas, Jerusalem).

That child advocacy now exists is an important new development. But it is worthwhile considering appointing these public figures through the Knesset in order to give them more than moral standing. Maybe we should follow the Norwegian example: in March 1981 the Norwegian Parliament passed an act in which the duties of a "commissioner for children" (ombudsman) were laid down.

We are hopeful that the members of the Knesset Committee on Labour and Social Affairs will take up their responsibility in this important area, and will give serious consideration to some of the proposals outlined here.

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