

Question on Notice
No: 199
Asked on 1 March 2006

MS LEE LONG asked the Minister for Child Safety (MR REYNOLDS) –

QUESTION:

With reference to the father of a girl under the age of 15 who has had to endure seeing his daughter leave home against his wishes and move in with her boyfriend and his family and despite the father's fears for his daughter's safety, he has been advised by police, Education Queensland and the Minister's department that there is nothing that can be done.

Is it the Minister's department's policy to aid and encourage petulant children to leave home for no good reason?

ANSWER:

I thank the Member for Tablelands for her question. As the Member would be aware, I am unable to comment on specific cases.

However, I can say categorically that it is not my department's policy to aid children to leave home for no good reason. My department is committed to acting both within the limits of its statutory mandate and under the principles enshrined in the *Child Protection Act 1999*.

My department's statutory responsibility, as outlined in the *Child Protection Act 1999*, is the protection of children and young people who have been significantly harmed or are at risk of significant harm and do not have a parent who is able and willing to protect them.

My department is required to investigate and assess all concerns about a child where it reasonably suspects that a child is in need of protection (*Child Protection Act 1999*, section 14). If departmental officers, through investigation and assessment, reasonably believe that a child is unsafe in their parents' care, they will provide support to the family and the child to help ensure the child can remain safely in his or her home and parents' care or if necessary provide a safe out-of-home care placement for the child. It will not intervene in situations where its statutory authority does not warrant, nor where careful evaluation indicates that a child is not in need of protection as determined under the Act.

There are a range of Queensland Government funded community programs that provide support to families. These include organisations such as Parentline, which provides confidential counselling to parents and practical parenting information and training seven days a week. The department's statutory capability to intervene in the lives of families is a significant power, and the rationale supporting a departmental officer's decision to intervene with a family must be able to withstand public scrutiny. To help ensure that decisions made by departmental officers are consistent, objective and based on best available research and information, the department has implemented the Structured Decision Making system. This system structures each critical decision-making point in the child protection system and ensures that the safety of each child is carefully assessed and critical case characteristics are not overlooked. Departmental officers across the state now have effective tools to help them focus on the critical issues and make better decisions for children and families.

The department's mandate is very specific and focused. We have practice tools that ensure accountability and consistency in assessing allegations of harm, a legislative framework that balances the need to protect children with the protection of parental rights, and a reform agenda set to establish an organisation dedicated to best practice. The *Child Protection Act 1999* contains the framework for this legislative mandate and the powers of the Childrens Court. The department may intervene with the family's agreement or through a court order obtained by application to the Childrens Court. The Childrens Court authorises certain key departmental actions and decisions, such as assuming custody and guardianships of a child or taking actions to assess a child's need for protection.

I therefore assure the Member for Tablelands that, beyond my department's mandate, we do not aid or encourage children to leave home, regardless of allegations of "petulance" or "without cause". Instead, we recognise that families have the primary responsibility for the upbringing, protection and development of their children and that the preferred way of ensuring a child's well-being is through the support of their family.