



News Release

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REPRESENTATIVE'S REPORT RECOMMENDS STEPS TO DEAL WITH PARENTAL ADDICTION

VICTORIA – The provincial government must take decisive steps to address the serious risk that parental addiction poses for many British Columbia children, Representative for Children and Youth Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond said today upon the release of her latest investigative report.

Children at Risk: The Case for a Better Response to Parental Addiction tells the story of a 10-year-old boy who suffered serious head and spinal injuries in a motor vehicle incident – illustrating a widespread underlying issue in the province's child welfare system. Contrary to a Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) safety plan, the boy was a passenger in a vehicle with his mother and her boyfriend, who had both been drinking that day.

“Parental addiction is a serious problem because it can leave vulnerable children in incredibly harmful situations,” Turpel-Lafond said. “The ministry must take steps to ensure that, in cases such as this boy's, the best interests of the child are made paramount over everything else and that proper policy and resources are in place in order to mitigate such disastrous effects of parental substance use.”

Making sure the best interests of the child are always the focus is the main recommendation of the report. Specifically, the Representative calls for specialist substance use consultants to be made available in every MCFD service area to assist workers in effective safety planning for children and, where appropriate, to assist in developing engagement strategies and support for family members.

One of the main issues in this boy's case was the limited capacity of his maternal grandparents to objectively deal with the addictions of his mother and the risks that they posed to the child. Even though the ministry's safety plan prohibited the mother from being allowed to supervise the child on her own, the grandparents were unable to ensure the plan was followed. As a result, the boy was routinely left in the mother's care, often neglected, and eventually injured.

The report recommends that in cases in which a child is to be placed with relatives, a timely assessment of both the needs of the child and the capacity of those relatives to care for the child is completed. In this case, such an assessment was never done for the grandparents and the ministry was never able to adequately engage the family in the child's care and safety.

Despite receiving five child protection reports about the boy over nine years, MCFD did not take adequate steps to ensure his safety until after he sustained critical injuries.

“This boy’s mother had a long history of addiction, including use of cocaine, amphetamines and opiates,” Turpel-Lafond said. “Yet only one of the many MCFD workers who dealt with this family over the years had any formal training on how to work with families challenged by addiction.”

The Representative recommends that MCFD create a learning tool, based on the findings of this report, to help the ministry better and more consistently serve children, parents and families in which substance use is an issue. Although the ministry does not know the percentage of cases in which this is a factor, its own practice guidelines suggest substance abuse by a parent is “*a dominant reality in child protection work.*”

The Representative also recommends that MCFD and the Ministry of Health work together to create a comprehensive addictions strategy and system of care for parents with substance abuse issues.

“Priority access to addictions treatment should be made available to parents in cases in which there are active child protection concerns,” Turpel-Lafond said. “Services should be responsive and tailored to the specific needs of this group.”

The full report can be viewed here:

<http://www.rcybc.ca/Content/Publications/Reports.asp>

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