

**Chairman,  
Welfare Services Panel,  
Legislative Council,  
Hong Kong.  
17-Feb-2011**

Dear Chairman,

I am writing on behalf of the Community Child Health Unit, Department of Paediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, The University of Hong Kong to submit the following recommendations and the attached Policy Brief on Childhood Injury in Hong Kong, in response to the Child Fatality Review for the Legislative Council Welfare Services Panel Meeting scheduled on 14 February 2011, Monday morning.

In view of the repeated avoidable tragedies related to leaving child unattended at home and fall from height through unguarded window, we would like to have the following recommendations:

- 1) Legislation against leaving any child (less than 12-year-old) unattended at home in Hong Kong.
- 2) Legislation to enforce compulsory installation of window guards in households with children (less than 12-year-old) in Hong Kong.

A Policy Brief on Childhood Injury in Hong Kong is also attached.

Yours faithfully,

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## **Policy brief: Children left unattended at home in Hong Kong**

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### **Overview of Childhood Injury**

Injury is a leading cause of adolescent death and disability globally (Jamison, et al., 2006). From the Child Health Survey conducted in 2005-2006 (Department of Health, 2009), the prevalence of injury that needed medical advice or treatment in children aged 14 and below was 4.4% in Hong Kong. Injury can cause serious morbidity and permanent disability to children. In particular, it is considered to be the leading cause of mortality and morbidity in preschool and school-age children. It is estimated that 875,000 deaths and tens of millions of hospitalizations occur as a result of injury each year (WHO, 2006).

### **Childhood home injuries in Hong Kong**

For children aged five or below, 77% of unintentional injuries occurred at home (Morrison, Stone, Doraiswamy, et al., 1999). Accidental injury has been recorded as the leading cause of death for children in Hong Kong, especially at home and on vacation in which claiming lives of 170 children a year (Channelnewsasia.com, 2009). Taken in account that about 30 children died of childhood cancers each year, hence death due to accidents is a very serious problem. Parents often concern about the dangers that their children face in the outside world, however home environment might have the greatest risk, considering the proportion of time young children spent at home. Parents should be proactive and be alert for traps that might cause accidents. The Child Accident Prevention Trust (1989) found that injuries happened more frequently at pre-school ages, particularly during the second and third years of life. These injuries often sustained at home, since young children spend majority of their time at home, apart from the preschool setting (Yip, 1999). A study on childhood injuries suggested that about 50-70% of the injuries in Hong Kong occurred at home (Chow, Chan, & Chiu, 1993). It is so unacceptable to realize that home injury is a major cause of death among children, as it is not unavoidable. In fact, most injuries could be prevented through removal of particular hazards and implementation of relevant interventions in home and social environment.

### **Current evidence**

The Child Health Survey (Department of Health, 2009) estimated that a total of 205,800 aged 10 and below children had ever left alone at home or being cared for by elder children aged below 16 in the past 12 months preceding the survey. This group represents a third of the total number of 0-10 children surveyed and 25% of those children being left unattended at home are aged below 5. Concern has been raised for more than 10 years, as it was estimated that 110,000 children aged 12 and below had been left unattended at home during the 7 days before enumeration in a General Household Survey (Census and Statistics Department, 1997). Unfortunately, there has been not much progress after that report and home injury remains a major area of concern in among families with children in Hong Kong.

According to a joint study by the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation and Rotary Club District 3450, 25% of children injured at home were sent to hospital and 74% of parents surveyed felt most home accidents were preventable (Siu, 2009). The study showed that "children being ever left unattended at home since birth" was a significant factor associated with a higher risk of childhood injury. Children are more likely to be left unattended at home if their parents need to work (Siu, 2009). The Hong Kong Christian Service Foster Care Service conducted a survey between January and March 2008, in exploring situation and feelings of unattended children left at home and their reaction towards their parents. In this study, 168 children aged 5-15 were being interviewed, 70% of them have experience of being left alone at home. And 70% of the parents leave their children unattended at home because they need to work or go shopping. Over 60% of the children know the whereabouts of their parents. The feelings were rather different between younger and older children being left alone at home. Most of the younger children are fearful or even angry to be left alone at home, while older children tend to be happier and more excited. However, most children expressed they do not like to be left alone at home for a long time. According to information provided by the Hong Kong Police Force that 49 child neglect cases involving children being left unattended at home and prosecution was taken against 10

parents. In seven of these cases, accidents and casualties resulted from caregivers' negligence (Labour & Welfare Bureau, 2008).

### **Legislation in Hong Kong**

Under the Hong Kong legislation, people who unlawfully abandon or put the life or health of a child at risk face a maximum of 10 years in jail. However, the Administration has no plan currently to make leaving children unattended at home a criminal offence. The existing law focuses on whether the negligence causes harm to children, in which the government found effective enough to protect children. Since reference was made to the practice in some overseas jurisdictions, in which they do not have separate provisions of leaving children at home a criminal offence. Moreover, such criminal offence may not achieve its desired objective, since some parents may seek to circumvent the legal responsibility by asking their children to wait outside their homes or wander on the streets or in shopping centres. Both the Against Child Abuse and the Hong Kong Pediatric Foundation suggested that the Hong Kong Government should establish a council to promote safety and to beef up punishment for those who put children at risk of injury (Siu, 2009). In addition, the government should reinforce and broaden the home-based Child Care Service and the role of education would be also important in preventing injuries. Injury prevention strategies for children require parents or caregivers' compliance and active behaviour in order to be implemented effectively.

### **Legislation elsewhere**

In UK, the law does not set a minimum age at which children can be left alone. However, it is an offence to leave a child alone when doing so that puts him or her at risk (Children's Legal Centre, 2006). In US, several states have set minimum age for allowing children that can be left alone at home while many others have not. From developmental perspective, most experts believe that children under the age of seven are not capable of thinking logically and putting cause and effect together, and they are reliant on caregivers to structure their day. Children between the ages of 7-10 are generally not ready to self-supervise for an extended period, but under a routine and predictable environment, such as just after school in which they can manage. Children at the age of 12 and 13 should be judged on a case-by-case basis but should not be left alone overnight. Several child protection organizations have provided guidelines and checklists on how to assess whether it is safe leaving children alone at home (Hastings Children's Aid Society, 2009; Durham Children's Aid Society, 2009). However, in general majority will recommend children below 12 years of age should not be left alone at home (Durham Children's Aid Society, 2009). Legislation against leaving children home alone should take a restorative rather than punitive approach, which parents being required to undergo training on positive parenting and child safety issue with follow up by child protection workers.

## **Roles of family caregivers**

Despite emphasis of effort has been placed to injury prevention through reduction of both environmental and behavioural risks, family caregivers' competencies are equally important in providing a safe environment for children. Family caregivers include parents, relatives, friends and others who take responsibility of looking after a child, in terms of protecting, nurturing, responding and guiding an infant (Limbo, Petersen, & Pridham, 2003). Previous research findings showed that parents have underestimated awareness of their children's risk to injury. In a Canadian study, parents were consistently able to identify home hazards and potential consequences in hypothetical situations; however, they didn't report any regular worrying about injury. Glik, Kronenfeld and Jackson (1991) showed that the importance of parents' perceived risk of injuries among children. Parents reported increased home safety-proofing behaviours if they believed these hazards were a threat to their children. In Hong Kong, parents do not refrain from taking small risks, which could cause serious consequences. Children have a great curiosity about the world and they don't know what danger is about. It is dangerous to leave a young child at home unattended, even if he is sleeping and his caregiver just wants to do some quick shopping. This was being reflected by a case report in Hong Kong, when a young child woke up and looked for his mother. He managed to push a chair to an open window, leaned out of the window, overbalanced and fell several storeys (Hume, 2007). Therefore a young child should never leave unattended under any circumstances.

## **Reported tragedies**

The Review Panel of the Pilot Project on Child Fatality Review's final report on the prevention of child health (2010) covered the deaths of 209 children, aged below 18 that occurred from 2006 to 2007. Thirty-two children who died of non-natural causes were killed in accidents, in which seven fell from height accidentally. For fall accident, child death occurs in the younger age groups with the highest number of child death comes from the age group 6-8. The youngest child fell from height and died was in the age group 1-2. Five of the fall cases occurred at home and four of the deceased children were left unattended (Review Panel of Pilot Project on Child Fatality Review, Hong Kong, 2010).

The number of fall incidents happened in the recent years has aroused renewed concerns in society for child safety. In May 2010, no one could imagine a three-year-old child not under supervision going to the back staircase of a building by himself and fell from a ventilation window (Siu, 2010). Although, this happened to be a rare case, as parents tend to be more alert in places other than home areas. Parents often found home is the safest place; however majority of the casualties in falls happened at home. This reminds parents about safety awareness regardless at home or outdoors, to teach children not to go out alone and not to climb near any windows. People may argue why not legislate to have all windows at home fitted with grilles. Another two tragedies happened in 2010 in regard to childhood falls at home. In November 2010, a four-year-old boy woke up after midnight, climbed out of a 16th floor kitchen window to play with a clothes rack fell to his death in Tin Shui Wai, while his mother and 18-year-old sister were sleeping (Wong, 2010). As the mother reported, the windows as well as the kitchen door are often locked at home; unfortunately, the windows in kitchen were left unlocked after hanging up clothes before that tragedy. Another six-year-old girl plunged to her death in Fan Ling

during last summer (Yu, 2010). Her mother went to the local wet market early at 6 o'clock in the morning, while the girl was asleep. During the time when she was left unattended at home, she was trying to look for her mother by climbing a trash bin in the kitchen and opened the window at which the grille was unlocked. At that moment, she lost her balance and plunged down to the podium. Sadness to say, there have been repeated happenings of tragedies of children falling to death in recent years.

## **Recommendations**

Recommendations were made by The Review Panel of the Pilot Project on Child Fatality (2010) in prevention of child death caused by accidents, including public education to remind parents of the possible fatal risk of leaving children unattended and the importance of home safety measures and devices when small children are present; to seek assistance from reliable child carers; and to give clear instructions to child carers to ensure child safety. **We further recommend the government to consider legislation against leaving children (less than 12-year-old) unattended at home.**

Falls are the leading cause of unintentional injury for children. In US, Children ages 14 or below account for one third of all fall-related visits to hospital emergency rooms (National SAFE KIDS Campaign [NSKC], 2004). Similarly, in recent years many of the fall tragedies reported in Hong Kong. **Legislation on compulsory installation of window guards in households with children less than 12 years old should be considered.** Because falls are associated with a child's curiosity and development of motor skills, younger children are at the greatest risk of fall-related death and injury. Window guards have been shown effective at preventing falls. In New York City, an education and window guard distribution program, combined with window guard legislation, demonstrated a 50% reduction in window-related falls, and a 35% reduction in window-related fatalities (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; NSKC, 2004). Some parents might consider hardware protection in this case window guards already provided sufficient protection for their children. However, as reflected by the accidents reported that teaching children about safety awareness should be considered as even more important. To avoid children falling into fatal traps, education plays a significant role in prevention of injury, so that children would know how to protect themselves regardless they are at home or outside.

To achieve the maximum impact on injury prevention, a whole population approach should be adopted (Evans & Kohli, 1997; Kendrick & Marsh, 1997). Domestic injuries could be devastating to a child and might even lead to death. On top it would be associated with all kinds of direct and indirect costs in both long-term and short-term basis. Childhood injury related hospitalizations would induce direct costs like medical and health care cost. Meanwhile, there would also be indirect costs that should also be taken into account, for example, school absenteeism, physical inactivity and parents might require to take leave off work to look after their children.

Therefore, both the government and the community should aim at **setting up a comprehensive childcare policy and relevant services to support the parents and look after the unattended children at home.** Suggestions being made include: more resources to extend childcare service hours; to provide flexible, convenient and inexpensive services; to assist schools and communities to build

support networks. Injury incidents can be avoided if the government establishes more day-care centres in all districts. In Hong Kong, there are more than 170,000 children aged 12 and under, in which less than 1% go to government-funded day-care centres (Yu, 2010). Many of the socioeconomic disadvantaged families found that private day-care centres are not affordable, as the average cost is HK\$18 per hour. Hong Kong is an affluent society. More resources should be allocated to the childcare services, as they are an investment in our children. In particular, to ensure affordable services are available and accessible complained that existing services were often located too far away from where they lived and that their operating hours were too short (Goh, 2007). For parents who may have to work at odd hours that leaving no time for them to attend to their children, it would be feasible for companies to share the responsibility with their employees and adopt a more child-care friendly policy, such as allowing flexible working hours for staff who may need to leave early to attend to their children. It was also suggested that parents to build a good relationship with neighbours so they can help out in times of emergency. The running of childcare service centres 24 hours a day, seven days a week is very costly, therefore government should encourage and provide more financial resources to support unconventional services such as community mutual help networks and training of parents, where one family helps look after the children of another family. The operation and service demands should be monitored and reviewed regularly to ensure that the concerned services can satisfy the demands of different districts. **Home visitation programmes** (e.g. Nurse-Family Partnership Programme) have also been shown to be effective in reducing home hazards, injuries and risk of child abuse (Olds, 2006). Home visitation programme should be introduced in Hong Kong to support young children born to high-risk parents and families in need, for example, to be part of the core services provided by the Comprehensive Child Development Services (CCDS), which is a community-based programme targeted at high-risk families (Education Bureau, Hong Kong, 2010).

### **Policy implications**

Promoting home safety is an ongoing effort of the policy bureau and departments concerned in relation to their respective areas of responsibilities. For instance, the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department promotes household electrical and gas safety, the Fire Services Department promotes fire safety, the Education Bureau encourages co-operation between schools and parents in promoting the awareness of home safety, the Department of Health promotes injury prevention, etc. Public education and promotion should be strengthened by raising parents and children's awareness on the dangers of being left alone at home. To improve education strategies, there is a need to better understand the determinants of injury prevention behaviour and how they may vary among different groups of parents (Wortel, de Geus, & Kok, 1994). In addition, there is a need of more counseling services for at-risk families, to do more to educate teenage parents, single parents and new immigrants with children. It is important that the message gets across to parents that they must look after their children at all times. Parents have every responsibility to take care of their young children. It is incumbent upon parents to make appropriate arrangements for their children, for example to be taken care of by friends or relatives or to make use of various available child care services. Under no circumstances should they run the risk of leaving their children unattended at home. One minute's neglect can result in tragedy. While legislation is not panacea for everything, when enacted



restoratively in concert with other supporting measures mentioned above, it will be the most powerful tool to ensure best protection of children.

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