

"Invisible" children could be abused, survey shows

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A survey today raises fears for the safety of thousands of 'invisible' children, five years after a child abuse inquiry urged tighter monitoring of private fostering arrangements.

The survey, by YouGov, showed that only 18% of professionals understand what private fostering is, though they all work with children and play a vital role in protecting them.

Lord Laming's inquiry into the abuse and murder of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié, who was privately fostered by her killer, urged a review of such arrangements in his report five years ago.

The government responded by ordering councils to be more proactive in identifying and monitoring privately fostered children, which they saw as crucial in ensuring their welfare.

Today's survey, commissioned by the charity The British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), found that of 223 professionals who worked with children, including doctors, nurses and teachers, only 18% knew what private fostering was.

David Holmes, the BAAF chief executive said that their ignorance 'could be putting vulnerable children at risk'. 'It is vital that every single professional who comes into contact with children understands what private fostering is and notifies where appropriate. If local authorities do not know where these children are and who they are living with, then they are powerless to keep them safe' he said.

'We believe there may be hundreds, or even thousands, of children and young people living with private foster carers in London who are effectively invisible because no one has notified the local authority about the arrangement'.

Tracey Emmott is a lawyer with Pictons of Luton who specialises in child abuse.

'It's worrying that this type of arrangement is still not understood by child welfare professionals' she says.

'Lord Laming's inquiry highlighted this issue as being of concern, yet it seems that five years on those who work with children have yet to come to terms with its implications for children's safety'.

Private fostering takes place when a child under the age of 16 is cared for by someone who is not a parent or close relative, through a private arrangement made between their parent and a carer, for 28 days or more.

Once a local authority knows about a private fostering agreement, a social worker will check the suitability of the arrangement and make regular visits to ensure the child is safe and well cared for. The council has the power to remove the child from private foster care if there are concerns for their welfare.

At the end of March 2006 there were 360 private fostering arrangements registered in London and 1,250 across England. But the Department of Health estimated there could be 10,000 privately fostered children in England and Wales.