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New rules to protect children

Alarm over abuse data

THE Federal Government is developing rules to protect children in foster care as new figures show a sharp rise in cases of abuse and neglect.

Child welfare experts have expressed alarm, but higher reporting rates have been cited as an explanation for the spike.

The Government was to release a standards paper today calling for regular health checks and visits to foster carers.

It calls for a national set of child protection standards to replace state and territory rules.

"[The standards] will ensure that every child and young person in care receives opportunities to develop at the same level as children not living in out-of-home care," the Department of Families and Community Services discussion paper says.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare figures released yesterday showed that national child abuse cases jumped by 6 per cent last year.

Child welfare authorities received 207,000 notifications and of those 33,000 were substantiated, a 1.7 per cent increase compared with the previous year.

The institute says increased community awareness and reporting rates could explain the rise, but not all child



STRUGGLE:
Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive officer Dr Joe Tucci.

welfare experts are convinced by that argument.

The Australian Childhood Foundation says authorities are not properly investigating incidents as they struggle to cope with the number of cases.

"When I look at those figures I think there are many children who are being left unprotected," chief executive Dr Joe Tucci said.

Director of the South Australian-based Australian Centre for Child Protection Professor Dorothy Scott said the child abuse figures were deeply concerning.

"The vast over-representation of Aboriginal children in our child protection systems shows that this is indeed a national crisis, requiring bipartisan concerted long-term strategies, and not just in remote areas," the University of South Australia academic said.

AAP