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# New foster care rules to help curb child abuse

By Stephen Johnson and Susanna Dunkerley

The Federal Government is developing new rules to protect children in foster care as 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 is issuing 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.

National child abuse cases jumped 6 per cent in 2009, figures published yesterday by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare showed.

Child welfare authorities received 207,000 notifications.

Of those, 33,000 were substantiated, a 1.7 per cent increase on the previous year.

The institute says increased community awareness and reporting rates could explain the rise, but not all child welfare experts are convinced by that argument.

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

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

Aboriginal children were eight times more likely to be on an order or living away from home.

Cases of neglect were higher in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, areas with more indigenous children. In other parts of Australia, emotional abuse was more common. NSW had the highest number of abused children – more than 14,000. **AAP**