

## EDITORIAL

### **More help for abused children**

The Diet has unanimously passed a bill to revise the law against child abuse. On the strength of a court-issued writ, staffers of children's welfare centers will be empowered to forcibly investigate households where abuse is suspected. It is hoped that the revised law, due to go into effect in April 2008, will effectively protect children against harm and death.

The current law took effect in November 2000. A 2004 revision allowed the head of a children's welfare center and a prefectural governor to ask that police officers accompany center staffers visiting households. But if parents refused to let staffers in, the latter were unable to verify the safety of children.

Under the latest revision, a governor may ask parents to appear before authorities if child abuse is suspected. If they refuse to comply twice, the governor may ask a family court or a summary court to issue a writ allowing center staffers to enter the household. Police officers may accompany them and force open locked doors if necessary. Parents who refuse to cooperate may be fined 500,000 yen, up from the current 300,000 yen.

In fiscal 2005, children's welfare centers across the nation dealt with 34,400 cases, about 30 times the figure in 1990. In about 10 percent of the 207 cases for which on-the-spot investigation was thought necessary, parents would not allow center staffers to enter their households. In May 2006, a 3-year-old child died of starvation in Izumizaki, Fukushima Prefecture. The father would not let a center staffer in. In October 2006, a similar incident happened in Nagaokakyo, Kyoto Prefecture, and another 3-year-old child died of starvation.

The revision allows a governor to issue an order prohibiting parents from shadowing children in protective custody. Violators may be imprisoned for up to one year or fined 1 million yen. But as for parents' failure to provide children with proper medical treatment, the revised law only mentions

studying the possibility of "partial suspension of parental prerogatives." Lawmakers should work out measures to effectively deal with cases of medical neglect as soon as possible.

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