

Preventing child abuse

In fiscal 2010, child consultation centers across Japan handled 55,152 child abuse cases, topping 50,000 for the first time. Statistics were not available in Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures and the city of Sendai because of the March 11 quake and tsunami. Even so, the figure is more than 10,000 cases higher than in fiscal 2009 and represents a yearly increase for 20 straight years since fiscal 1990 when statistics were first taken and when 1,101 cases of abuse were reported.

If the three disaster-hit local entities are excluded, the latest statistics means an increase of 12,090 or 28.1 percent over fiscal 2009 — much greater than the 3.6 percent rise in fiscal 2009 and topping the 25.7 percent rise in fiscal 2004. More and more people apparently have become keen about child abuse and telephoned child consultation centers about children who were heard crying or screaming in their neighborhood.

Thanks to revisions of the Child Abuse Prevention Law, child consultation center workers, with a court permit, can enter homes that refuse to cooperate with centers' investigation and in an emergency situation, center directors' judgment is allowed to prevail over parents' judgment. A Civil Law Act revision makes it possible to suspend parents' prerogatives over children for up to two years — a flexible and effective means to protect children in a dangerous situation. Child consultation center heads and workers must examine whether they have fully used their legally endowed powers to prevent child abuse.

A case believed to have contributed to heightening people's awareness about child abuse was the death of two children in July 2010 in an Osaka apartment abandoned by their 23-year-old mother, who was later arrested. About four months before the children's death, neighbors who heard them crying had called a child consultation center frequently and center workers visited the apartment five times. But they stopped short of entering the apartment on the grounds that the mother was not at home.

It is imperative that child consultation centers, schools, the police and medical institutions establish smooth cooperative relationships so that child abuse will be prevented. Budgetary measures also should be taken to increase the number of center workers.