

11th March 2010, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, (IPS) - Vietnamese parents think of day care centres and kindergartens as safe, happy places to leave their children in, given the pressures of work and harder times. But they are no longer so sure now, after a series of incidents about mistreatment of young children that has shocked the public.

The latest wake-up call to parents and government officials alike was the death last month of 14-month-old Truong Thuy Vy, two days after he started going to the Mam Non (Young Buds) kindergarten in the southern province of Binh Duong.

Left alone to use the toilet, he slipped on the slippery floor, fell into a basin of water and drowned.

The incident prompted Binh Duong's Office of Education and Training to close down the kindergarten, even as it promised to be more vigilant in monitoring school facilities. "There are still many private day care centres and kindergartens that lack adequate facilities assuring hygiene and safety to children," the office said in a statement.

Many also still remember the outcry that followed the airing by Vietnam Television (VTV1) last year of video showing a babysitter abusing five children entrusted to her at a day care centre.

Hue, a staffer at a small family-owned day care centre in Bien Hoa in Dong Nai province, was caught on tape grabbing the hair and slapping the young children to force them to open their mouths while she was feeding them.

In a society influenced by Confucianism, disciplining youngsters by striking or humiliating them as a part of parenting or good, firm teaching would not usually raise too many eyebrows. "To love a child is to give (him or her) the rod,' as an old saying goes.

But reports of the use of extreme punishment, including physical ones, has gotten many here concerned, especially against the backdrop of economic difficulties that force parents to have others look after their children and lead to the opening of less than quality institutions looking after these youngsters.

"The 'rod culture' makes grown-ups believe that violence against children is something normal," said Nguyen Thi Oanh, a sociologist.

A survey conducted in 2006 by Vietnam's Commission for Population, Family and Children in several provinces, quoted in media reports, showed that 58.3 percent of children were insulted, hit or slapped when they make a mistake or to discipline them. A seminar on corporal punishment was held by the government in 2008.

The sight of an adult hitting a child usually goes unnoticed. Only when a child is badly injured

that the police interfere and charge the adult with social disorder, not child abuse.

"Lower income prompts (day care centre) owners to ask babysitters take care of more children and work for longer hours," Hoa (not her real name), who works at a privately owned day care centre near Tan Tao Industrial park in this southern Vietnamese city, said. She said this puts caretakers under intense pressure, making them short tempered.

Hoa admitted having to "sometimes slap kids" to make them stop crying or to eat faster. "I know that slapping a child, even on the hand, is not nice, but sometimes it is my last resort," she said.

Hoa works 20 hours a day, six days a week, and receives one million dong (53 U.S. dollars) a month - just enough for food and rental of a dilapidated room that she shares with a friend and a little bit of savings "for bad days".

Like many governesses working for small, family-owned day care institutions, Hoa was not trained for her job.

"The reason (for the brutality of the babysitter shown on VTV1) is that the babysitter lacks skills and responsibility," Nguyen Thi Kim Thanh, chief of the pre-school department of Ho Chi Minh City's Office of Education and Training, told the 'Saigon Giai Phong' newspaper.

But this problem also points to a bigger one – the fact that parents resort to smaller, less regulated private child care facilities because the government, due to economic constraints, cannot afford to enroll all young children in high-quality state institutions.

Here in Ho Chi Minh City, state-run kindergartens could only accommodate 30 to 40 percent of children and the others have to go to private institutions, local officials say.

There are 200 private kindergartens and 765 family-owned day care institutions in this city. The latter are mostly facilities that were opened with small capital and employ untrained staff.

"Because they charge low tuition fees from parents, they do not pay much to their teachers," Thanh said of these institutions. "The poor cannot send their children to state-owned schools or well-equipped private institutions. Their only choice would be the small, private and poorly-invested institutions."

Media reports have continued to follow stories about the problems inside these centres.

In the central Nghe An province, a teacher threw a ruler at a primary school pupil and injured his eye when he failed to hand over his work on time. In the highland province of Dak Lak, a sixth grade pupil was accused of theft and sent to the police, after which claimed his innocence by ingesting insecticide.

There are also untoward incidents against children inside the home, due to a mix of factors that include the impact of the economic crisis on households.

Tran Van Thanh, who lost his job at the Tan Binh Footwear Co as overseas orders dropped due to the global recession, turned to drinking and would come home and beat his wife and six-year-old child, according to local media reports.

Thanh is one of the 74,500 workers who had lost their jobs as of the end of February 2009, according to data from MOLISA.

Source: IPS