

# Child protection overhaul 'could lead to false abuse claims'

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Thursday March 4, 2004

[SocietyGuardian.co.uk](http://SocietyGuardian.co.uk)

Government plans to set up a sophisticated tracking system to keep tabs on every child in England could lead to parents being falsely accused of child abuse, child welfare experts warned today.

An electronic file would be created on every child to record warning signs of abuse and neglect, including professionals' concerns and theories, in a bid to enable child protection services to intervene before families reach crisis point, under the children's bill published today.

Eileen Munro, reader in social policy at the London School of Economics, said this risked a repeat of the recent cases of parents' falsely accused of causing the cot deaths of their babies.

Ms Munro, an expert on child protection risk assessments, said that the accumulation of minor concerns on the proposed databases by different childcare staff could lead to problems being blown out of proportion, or misinterpreted as in recent child protection scandals, including the murder of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié.

She said: "The databases proposed by the children bill will allow a wide range of staff to record any information they consider relevant, which is a gross invasion of privacy. This information will not only include factual information but also professionals' concerns and theories, which risks a repeat of the recent cases of parents wrongly accused of causing the cot deaths of their children.

"Victoria Climbié's case illustrates the fallibility of professional judgment, a point also emphasised by the recent cases of parents wrongly accused of Munchausen syndrome by proxy. While it may be possible to challenge the accuracy of factual information on a database, it is not so easy to challenge judgments. It is also difficult to shake off the smear even when a judgment is revised."

The children bill will require 150 local authorities to set up databases on all local children and young people, recording warning signs of abuse, neglect and offending behaviour, in a bid to enable staff to identify and assist children and families with potentially serious problems before they reach crisis point.

But Terri Dowty, policy officer for the family welfare organisation Action on Rights for Children, condemned the proposed surveillance system as "an outrageous intrusion into family life".

She claimed that the databases would present "an open invitation to child abusers", and called on the government to provide a cast-iron guarantee that the widespread sharing of such sensitive information would not compromise children's safety or privacy.

"We only have to look at the spate of recent prosecutions of 'caring' professionals who have abused children - teachers, police officers, social workers and others - to seriously question the government's judgement in promoting such an ill-conceived and dangerous scheme," said Ms Dowty.

"It is an unacceptable intrusion into the lives of families who are responsible for bringing up their children and for ensuring their safety is not compromised. The accuracy and security of data can never be guaranteed, and the whole concept conflicts with existing data protection legislation and European

convention on human rights."

The education secretary, Charles Clarke, has dismissed concerns about the proposed surveillance system, saying that the interests of children "absolutely" took precedence over the civil liberties of adults.