

‘Fat police’ put children on abuse list

Sarah-Kate Templeton, Health Correspondent

SOCIAL workers are placing obese children on the child protection register alongside victims thought to be at risk of sexual or physical abuse.

In extreme cases children have been placed in foster care because their parents have contributed to the health problems of their offspring by failing to respond to medical advice.

The intervention of social services in what was previously regarded as a private matter is likely to raise concerns about the emergence of the “fat police”.

Some doctors even advocate taking legal action against parents for illtreating their children by feeding them so much that they develop health problems.

Dr Russell Viner, a consultant paediatrician at Great Ormond Street and University College London hospitals, said: “In my practice, I can think of about 10 or 15 cases in which child protection action has been taken because of obesity. We now constantly get letters from social workers about child protection due to childhood obesity.”

Viner points out that children are not placed on the child protection register simply for being obese but only if parents fail to act on advice

and take steps to help their children lose weight.

“Obesity in itself is not a child protection concern,” he said. “When parents fail to act in their child’s best interests with regard to their weight — for example, if they are enrolled on a behavioural treatment session and only get to two out of 10 sessions or if they miss medical appointments — then the obesity becomes a child protection concern.” Dr Alyson Hall, consultant child psychiatrist at the Emmanuel Miller Centre for Families and Children in east London, said that in some cases children were put into foster care to ensure their safety.

“I have known instances where local authorities have had to consider placement outside the family. It has been voluntary so far, and has not gone to care proceedings, but that could happen,” she said.

“These are children suffering from sleep apnoea and serious health complications from diabetes. Initially, social workers try to help the parents but, in some cases, the parents are the problem.”

Earlier this month two brothers were convicted of causing unnecessary suffering by letting their dog become obese. The labrador, Rusty, was 11 stone, more than double the weight he should have been, and could hardly stand. “We wonder whether the same charge should be applicable to the parents of dangerously obese children,” said Dr Tom Solomon, a neurologist at Royal Liverpool University hospital.

“I think it should be considered. It depends on the parents’ attitude. If the parents say there is nothing they can do because their child only likes to eat chips and biscuits then perhaps it might be worth the state intervening.

“The state intervenes with schooling. Parents who do not send their children to school are prosecuted eventually. To be badly educated is not dangerous but we are making our children diabetic, and even killing our children by our

feeding habits.”

Tam Fry, chairman of the Child Growth Foundation, a charity that fights childhood obesity, agreed. “It should be a punishable offence,” he said.

“Very obese children are taking up NHS resources that should be used for legitimate purposes. Parents have got to be held accountable for overfeeding their children or letting their children become fat without taking action.”

Other health workers, however, argue that parents should not be punished because social circumstances sometimes prevent them from ensuring their children follow a healthy diet.

Last week the government’s strategy for tackling childhood obesity was criticised as “confused” and “dithering” by the Commons public accounts committee.

MPs warned that ministers are set to miss their target to halt the rise in childhood obesity by 2010. The number of children aged under 11 who are obese leapt from 9.9% in 1995 to 13.4% in 2004.