

Spike in drug addict mothers

CHILD rights activists, welfare organisations and NGOs are gravely concerned about the serious rise in drug-addicted mothers and the impact this has on the well-being of their children.

The problem was highlighted with the discovery of the body of little Orderick Lucas, who went missing after his mother left him with an acquaintance. She is a self-confessed substance abuse addict. According to Child Welfare Stellenbosch director Bettie Nieuwoudt, the probability of a child being neglected by a mother on drugs was 100%.

“This can be attributed to the effect of drugs on the functionality of the mother and her ability to be in touch with reality. In the case of breast-feeding mothers, the child is automatically exposed to intoxication themselves, which can cause death in babies, and malnourishment,” she said. Nieuwoudt said in the last three months, her office had received 106 referrals (children at risk) where drug addiction (tik) had been the reason for referral, and in an average month they got 36 referrals, all related to drug usage by parents. Research on child violence found that in 30% of all rape and abuse cases of children, the mother was directly involved. Either the perpetrator was her partner, she was aware of the abuse or she left the child unsupervised,” said Nieuwoudt.

Nieuwoudt’s most recent case was that of 22-month-old Orderick, who was found dead in a drain on April 2, eight days after he went missing. His mother, Davideen Lucas, said she had left the child in the care of a male friend. The friend, Melvin Volkwyn, is facing a charge of kidnapping. His bail application will be heard on May 7.

Manenberg Safety Forum chairperson Roegshanda Pascoe said there were many cases on the Cape Flats where children were forced to look after one another because the mother was out on the streets in search of drugs. “The courts must start asking the mothers tough questions and charge them, together with the perpetrators, for neglect. A child whose mother is on drugs is left vulnerable in the house; that child is in danger of being raped, molested or even killed. Drugs have the worst impact on children’s lives,” she said. Pascoe alleged that the Chanelle McCrawl murder case was of a similar nature. Chanelle, 10, was raped and murdered in Manenberg in October last year. She was last seen heading to school, but never arrived. “Where is our accountability as mothers who gave birth to these children? Drugs are finishing young mothers, and this affects the way they raise their children,” she said.

Nadine Harker, specialist researcher at the SA Medical Research Council’s Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Use Research Unit, said only 22% of young females sought help for their addiction, compared with 78% of men. “The reason they don’t seek treatment is because of stigma – the stigma of you being a substance-abusing mother. There are also care-giving barriers and the distance of seeking treatment. Young women don’t have the resources to go for help, and there might not be good enough programmes.”

Provincial Social Development spokesperson Esther Lewis said parents who engaged in harmful substance use may expose children to unsafe environments, and they may leave children unattended. “When a report of neglect or abuse is made to the department, the social worker must respond immediately to do a risk assessment in the child’s home environment. If it is found that the child is in immediate danger, the child will be removed and taken to a temporary place of safety. The case will then be heard in the Children’s Court within 48 hours, and the magistrate will rule on the child’s placement. Parallel to this process, the social worker has 90 days to complete the investigation,” she said.