Grand mufti urges Emiratis to foster children abandoned in the UAE

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DUBAI // More Emiratis must come forward to foster abandoned children, the grand mufti of Dubai has said.

"If we know of a case and do nothing then we fail as a people," said Dr Ahmad Abdulaziz Al Haddad, grand mufti and head of the Fatwa department at the Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department in Dubai. "And if we are not even aware that this problem exists then we are failing as a society."

Dr Al Haddad made the call at a forum to discuss children of unknown parentage hosted yesterday by the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children (DFWAC) and attended by experts in the field, including officials from the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Although adoption is not permitted in Islam, the grand mufti said fostering was a moral obligation. "The victims of this problem are innocent and we are responsible as a society to help them."

The importance of placing children in families rather than shelters was explained by Dr Suad Al Marzouqi, a psychologist and dean of student affairs at UAE University.

"A stable mother figure is very important in a child's growth, which is something that doesn't necessarily happen in shelters where the caregivers may change," she said.

At many shelters the only physical contact infants receive is when they are being washed and changed, Dr Al Marzouqi added. "From birth to two years of age physical contact is very important."

Between 2008 to 2012, Dubai's Latifa Hospital has placed 41 abandoned children in new homes while giving shelter to another 28. During the same period, at least 390 children in the emirate were placed in foster care by other agencies.

In Sharjah, the Department of Social Services sheltered 140 children and found foster homes for 165 in the same four-year period.

Sharjah was the first emirate to implement laws to protect the rights of children with unknown parentage in 1985, and these were ratified in 2006.

Each emirate had its own laws on the matter until a federal law was implemented last year.

The new law provides citizenship and all the rights of a UAE citizen to any child born to an Emirati mother and unknown father, and any child born in the country whose parents' identity cannot be determined.

It also outlines that the identity documents of an abandoned should not identify them as such.

Badria Al Farsi from the DFWAC said the law had helped but there was still work to be done to ensure it was enforced.

"Many shelters are having issues getting all the documentation and citizenship papers for the children, which allows them free education and health care. This puts an unfair burden on the shelter to cover these financial costs," she said.
Abandoned children in Sharjah are given access to health care as quickly as possible, according to Jasem Mohammed Al Hammadi from the Sharjah Department of Social Services. "We have coordinated with the health care authorities to issue their medical cards, labelled as a citizen, early on - even before the citizenship papers are issued," she said. "This is something I feel other organisations may benefit from."

Several at the forum agreed there should be government incentives for Emirati women to work as caregivers in shelters.

"Substitute mother should be Emirati or at least from the GCC," said Dr Al Marzouqi. "Many care centres these days have foreign caregivers which can affect the child's identity.

"This is a very complex and sensitive psychological situation, especially for children. From the ages of six to 12, this period is the most sensitive. This is where they start to learn basic skills. Here they may begin to develop a feeling of failure and separation from the family."

Dr Al Haddad explained that because lineage and a sense of knowing one's heritage is so important in Islam, a child does not take the name of their new guardian or his lineage. If his mother is known then he takes his mother's name, otherwise he is given a name not linked to his foster parents.

The grand mufti also explained that foster children do not count as siblings, meaning they may marry someone from the household once they are grown.

"Some families overcome this issue of the child's separation from the siblings by breastfeeding them as infants," said Ms Al Farsi, explaining that a child who is breastfed by a mother is considered a sibling under Sharia. "They do this so that the child will not feel left out and segregated from the foster family, the child will truly be just like the other children in the family."

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