

**FOSTER PARENTS — JOHN AND PATRICIA WIESKE**

*Grievance*

**MR P. ABETZ (Southern River)** [9.32 am]: My grievance is to the parliamentary secretary representing the Minister for Child Protection. I am sure that all members remember that last year we were told there was a serious shortage of foster parents and we were all asked to help recruit families to take on that valuable role in the community. It was therefore with some surprise that Mr and Mrs John Wieske, for whom I had written a reference in support of their application to serve as foster carers, were rejected. I have known this family some 10 years. I have had the opportunity to see this family of 11 children functioning in various settings, and by all standards they are an exemplary family with lovely confident children who are courteous, polite and respectful.

John and Patricia Wieske were more than happy to give the Department for Child Protection an assurance that they would adhere to the department's policy that children in foster care are not allowed to be punished physically or emotionally, as stated in the DCP document "Better Care, Better Services: Standards for Children and Young People in Protection and Care". However, they were rejected as foster parents because they said that they wanted to reserve the right, when they felt it appropriate, to give physical punishment to their own biological children. Keep in mind that we are not talking about slapping kids around, but taking children into their own room, talking to them about what they have done and then give them a smack on the hand or on the bottom.

I found it hard to believe that this would automatically disqualify a couple from serving as foster parents, so I took the matter up with the minister, who kindly arranged a meeting in my office with Mr Paul Maher, executive director of accommodation and care services, and Judith Wilkinson, director of fostering services, and John and Patricia Wieske. At the meeting we were told that because children placed in foster care often come from a context of domestic violence or abuse, a child who has experienced such trauma would be further traumatised if he or she knew, even if he or she did not witness it, that other children in the family from time to time received a smack from mum or dad. For this reason, Ms Wilkinson informed us at the meeting, any couple who practise physical punishment of any kind, be it ever so light or rare, are automatically excluded from being foster parents. Ms Wilkinson and Mr Maher told Mr and Mrs Wieske that they had no problem with their method of parenting and that it was obviously working well for their biological children. They acknowledge that the Wieske family, by all accounts, are an exemplary family. However, because they want to reserve the right to give a smack to their own children, even though it would be out of sight of the foster child, they had been rejected as foster parents.

Naturally, we would all agree that a traumatised child should not be in a family where parents belt their biological children. However, I give the example of what my wife and I did with our little ones. When our little ones were learning to crawl, we did not take everything out of the house that kids could touch but if they went to the pot plant and wanted to pull a leaf, we would simply say, "No." If they kept going, we would simply take their little hand and with two fingers tap it and say, "No." We were told even that would automatically exclude a family from being foster carers. The Department for Child Protection officers in my office said that anyone who insisted on having the freedom to do that with their own biological children would be automatically excluded from being foster parents. I put it to the house and to the officers that if they believe their own rhetoric, given that so many children who go into foster care come from homes where alcohol is abused, for that very reason one would then expect that the department would require all foster parents to be teetotallers. Simply the smell of alcohol on a foster parent's breath would immediately bring to mind the context of alcohol abuse and the suffering the kids had previously experienced. However, I am sure that DPC does not impose a condition of being a teetotaller to be a foster parent. I am sure that all of us, even DCP staff, recognise that it is all a matter of degree. We accept that foster parents can have a glass of wine with their meal or a beer at a family barbecue; likewise, with physical punishment, it is a matter of degree.

There must be many, many very competent parents in our community who have a proven track record of providing a very stable loving environment for children who are being excluded on the basis of an ideology that is not supported by the wider community and has absolutely no basis in science or commonsense.

Mr and Mrs Wieske said to me had they been rejected as foster parents because they have 11 children—the youngest is about six years old I think—and the department thought that maybe they would not have enough love to go round, although they would disagree with that, they could accept it. However, to be rejected specifically because they reserve the right to occasionally smack their own biological children seems bizarre to me, to say the very least. I therefore call on the minister to require the Department for Child Protection to review its screening policy and to stop excluding parents who from time to time in a very measured and controlled way wish to reserve the right to exercise physical punishment on their own biological children.

**MR A.J. SIMPSON (Darling Range — Parliamentary Secretary)** [9.38 am]: I thank the member for Southern River for his grievance and he raises a very good concern.

I am advised by the Minister for Child Protection that the Department for Child Protection gave serious consideration to the case put by Mr and Mrs Wieske due to their obvious strengths as a family, noting that they have 11 children, but criteria need to be met. It should be noted that children who come into the foster care of the department are emotionally fragile and have learnt from their experiences not to trust adults. Children who find that on occasion children in the household are hit may not trust the assurance that they will not be chastised and may consequently feel anxious and uncomfortable. Due to the commitment by Mr and Mrs Wieske to a model of parenting that includes the practice of physically chastising children, this would compromise their capability to foster a child placed in the care of the department. The decision not to approve Mr and Mrs Wieske's application has been reviewed by the independent fostering assessment panel. The panel agreed that the children in the care of the Department for Child Protection should not be placed with families in which any child in the home is subject to any form of physical chastisement. The Minister for Child Protection has informed me that she will not ask the Department for Child Protection to review the current screening policy on whether foster parents can exercise physical punishment on their biological children.

I guess this is one of those classic situations in which a child who comes into foster care is basically in the care of the state. As a government, in that process, we have to ensure the best possible protection of the children. The fostering assessment panel looks at every application. The member raised a number of issues generally about how best to raise our children and whether smacking them is part of that. That is the information that unfolds in the assessment process. I agree that Mr and Mrs Wieske, who are raising 11 children, are probably good parents.

Unfortunately, foster parents must meet strict criteria. As we all know, if a child has been abused in some form and is placed with a family where he or she receives more abuse, the child can psychologically slip back a long way. Unfortunately, criteria must be met and potential foster parents must be assessed by the panel. Those criteria amount to a line we have drawn in the sand because, as the member can imagine, the protection of the child is the most important issue. I thank the member for his grievance and I apologise, but the decision was made based on the process we must undertake.