

'Not enough invested in child abuse prevention'

National Council for the Child presents annual report to Peres

• By GREER FAY CASHMAN

"We don't invest enough in the prevention or treatment of child abuse," Dr. Yitzhak Kadman, executive director of the National Council for the Child told said Wednesday. Kadman was at the President's Residence to present President Shimon Peres with the first copy of the 2011 edition of the almanac *Children in Israel*, published for the 20th consecutive year.

Containing hundreds of pages of child-oriented statistics, the almanac, which Kadman asserted is the only one of its kind in the world, paints a disturbing picture about the inadequacy of educational, health, social welfare and leisure time services available to the nation's children.

Citing some of the thought-provoking statistics that have been accumulated in the book, Kadman said: "It's a myth that we love children." Promises about a better future are constantly made to children, but children can't live on promises alone, he said.

Kadman called on the government to prove it means what it says when it talks about what it wants to do for the child population.

"We have to do what needs to be done now and stop talking about the future," he said.

Professor Asher Ben-Arieh, the editor of *Children in Israel* and the director of the Haruv Institute established by the Israel division of the Schusterman Foundation to protect the rights of all children and to work towards giving them a safe and secure upbringing, declared that not only has the situation not improved, but in some instances has deteriorated.

He was particularly concerned about the sexual, psychological and physical abuse of children, which over a 15-year period has increased by 180%.

There were 48,000 cases reported in 2010 alone.

Abuse is not always defined by violence, Ben-Arieh explained. Sometimes it's just sheer negligence.

As far as negligence is concerned, Ben-Arieh was severely critical of municipalities that fail to provide sufficient extracurricular activities for youth, as a result of which many children are put risk because they are outside of any supervised framework, and can often be seen roaming shopping malls either on their own or in packs.

At the end of 2010, the total

number of children in Israel was 2,519,900, representing 32.7% of the overall population. Of these, 8.6% - a total of 215,477 - live in single parent households compared to 6.8% in 1990.

In the 40-years from 1970-2010 the child population has more than doubled from 1,183,000 to just under 2,520,000. Part of the difference can be attributed to immigration, even though the number of child immigrants has been decreasing annually from 54,051 in 1990 to 4,632 in 2010.

Of the 166,255 babies born in Israel in 2010, 75.5% were Jewish, while the overall percentage of Jewish children in the country in 2010 was considerably lower and stood at 69.7%. Muslim children accounted for 24%, those without religion 2.8%, Christian children 1.7% and Druze 1.9%.

Of these, the only increase percentage-wise since 1995 was in the Muslim community, where the percentage had risen from 20.2%. In all other cases there had been a marked decline in percentage points.

Jerusalem, which has the largest population in the country also has the largest child population, and heads the list of births in 2010 by an extraordinary lead of 22,383 compared to only 8,015 in Tel Aviv, and even fewer in Bnei Brak, which is listed as having 5,662 births. Ashdod was next with 4,258 followed by Petah Tikva with 3,935, Haifa 3,878, Rishon Lezion 3,654, Netanya 3,405, Beersheba 3,261 and Holon 3,106.

One of the astounding statistics relates to the number of children in Israel who are not Israeli citizens. About 35,000 are children of permanent resident or foreign workers. But of a total of 155,000 without Israeli citizenship, 77.4% are residents of east Jerusalem.

Of the children in single-parent households, 666 are the offspring of soldiers who lost their lives in the line of duty.

Because it is difficult to adopt orphans or children removed from unfit parents in Israel, many adoptions are conducted abroad. In 2010, only 78 Israeli-born children were put up for adoption. Of these, 48 were babies up to the age of 2, The year 2007, was a relatively heavy year for adoptions from abroad rising to 221 compared to 174 in the previous year. In 2010, there was a sharp decline to 124. Most adopted babies in Israel in recent years were born in Ukraine and Russia. Up until

2002, there were also infants born in Romania, but adoptions from that country have since ceased. The total number of adoptions from 1998-2010 of children born abroad was 2,463.

Both Kadman and Ben-Arieh noted a very high percentage of children don't find school to be a pleasant place, as a result of which some drop out because they can't cope including youngsters from well functioning families.

"45% of children tell us they don't want to go to school," said Kadman.

One such teenager was an 18-year-old by the name of Yonatan, who gave a dissertation on school dropouts, blending statistics with his own personal story. Yonatan, who comes from Tel Aviv simply couldn't concentrate in school. It had nothing to do with his family background. His family, he said, was perfectly normal. But Yonatan suffers from an

attention deficiency disorder, which none of his teachers recognized.

He just kept getting low marks, and one year he did so poorly in the exams that he was kept down. School was a frustrating place for him, a place in which he felt ignored and humiliated. He was on the verge of becoming a school dropout until he came into contact with an education counselor who urged him to enroll in the HILA program, a complementary education project under the auspices of the Education Ministry's Youth at Risk Advancement department, and administered by municipalities across the country.

Yonatan has been in the program for two years, and is getting good grades at levels that he never dreamt of when he was in junior high school. He is now working towards a full high school diploma.

HILA is geared to dropouts and youth at risk. Kadman pro-

nounced Yonatan a prime example of what can be done for people with special needs once their potential is recognized.

The problem, Ben-Arieh pointed is that social services have not grown at the same rate as the population. Every social worker engaged in child welfare has a caseload of 170 files when it is generally accepted in Western countries that the maximum case load should be no more than 30 files. The child social welfare system is in danger of collapse, he warned.

There was some good news, however. There has been a decrease in infant mortality, and contrary to popular belief said Ben-Arieh, there has been a drop in the incidence of juvenile crime.

Peres spoke of the importance of encouraging young people in the class room and in areas of informal education.

Emphasizing that Israel's human resources are its best asset, Peres said that if children are not encouraged to develop their potential, the country will have no future. Everyone has untapped potential, he said. He had met with many junior scientists who at ages as young as 12, were incredibly innovative and creative, had produced amazing products and had started businesses, he said.

Peres recommended every school child undertake a high tech project of some kind and proposed they should work for two hours each day in a hi-tech plant to gain the satisfaction of team work and an understanding of the hi-tech environment.

He couldn't understand young people who go to the beach and spend hours doing nothing other than lying on the sand just to get sun tanned, he said. "They should make something. They would enjoy it more."



PRESIDENT SHIMON PERES meets yesterday with youth during a presentation ceremony of the 2011 edition of the almanac 'Children in Israel.' (Mark Neiman/GPO)