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Migrant parents who fail to provide care for their children back home face punishment

Migrant worker parents who leave children behind in their hometowns without giving them regular attention or adequate care might face punishment in accordance with a new guideline.

The guideline on the protection of left-behind children, signed by Premier Li Keqiang and released this month, defines the responsibilities of parents and government, and recognizes the parents as bearing the primary responsibility in the care of their children.

"Some irresponsible parents give birth to children, but leave them behind uncared for, seriously harming their physical and mental health," Vice-Minister of Civil Affairs Zou Ming said on Friday at a State Council Information Office media briefing.

"Parents can be punished accordingly if the children are confirmed to have been severely harmed by their indifference," Zou warned.

The parents' custody of the children might be revoked, under the guideline.

A 2015 survey conducted by Shangxuelushang, an NGO that helps left-behind children, said about 15 percent of them reported having no physical contact with their parents during the course of a calendar year.

Four percent received just one phone call a year from parents, it said.

"The psychological impact can be enormous, and that can lead to poor school performance and extreme behavior among the children, such as suicide," said Tong Lihua, head of Beijing Children's Legal Aid and Research Center.

In June, four siblings aged 5 to 13 years who had been left behind in Bijie, Guizhou province, committed suicide by drinking pesticide at home.

Zou urged parents to take their children with them when they seek employment in cities or "at least, one parent should stay behind at home to take care of them."

In addition, the guideline says that society and government also have a role in caring for such children.

Local governments and village committees must keep themselves well-informed about the situation of left-behind children within their jurisdiction and ensure that they are properly taken care of, the guideline stipulates.

Education authorities and schools have an obligation to help them study and live safely, it says.

Wang Dinghua, the primary education chief at the Education Ministry, said the ministry will introduce more measures to ensure that migrant children can receive schooling where their parents work.

A 2010 National Census showed that nearly 36 million children under the age of 18 traveled with their migrant worker parents for employment.

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