

You're not children so

THE photographs on the sitting-room walls are of happy times in a young family's life. In pride of place are snapshots of a heartbreakingly pretty toddler, the very image of her mother at the same age.

They chronicle her growing up, playing on a slide, sitting on her mum's knee and smiling into the camera. More recent pictures show the new addition, a little brother, still just a baby, shaking a rattle and gazing at his father.

Yet this is all their parents have left of their children. For the three-year-old girl and 11-month-old boy were taken away from them by Essex County Council last October, and they have not seen the children for nearly six months.

In three weeks' time, their son and daughter will be adopted by a new 'forever Mummy and Daddy', as the social services' appallingly saccharine jargon puts it, and contact with their birth parents will be reduced to a twice-yearly letter and photographs.

So, what terrible crime did this couple commit to have been punished so cruelly? Did they beat their children? Was there sexual abuse? Were the children left roaming the streets?

No. But the reasons for the brutal fracturing of this family are just as shocking. For these parents have been judged to be too 'slow' intellectually to have children.

The local authority has ruled that the youngsters were at risk of neglect because their mother didn't follow proper routines, took too long to brush her teeth and change the baby's nappies, left the little girl to play alone, had difficulty learning how to cook simple meals and did not encourage her daughter to sit on a potty.

Perversely, the father was criticised for being too rigid in his routines with the

It could come from a Kafka novel... In utter secrecy, a loving couple have both their children confiscated and sent for adoption. The reason? Social workers say the parents are too 'slow'. Mail writer
FIONA BARTON

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children, and for becoming irritated by interference from the local authority.

Social workers who assessed the couple admitted that the children were loved, kept clean, well-dressed and fed — but still recommended that they be removed because the parents were not intelligent enough to understand their youngsters' needs.

That judgment has, of course, had a devastating effect on the couple, who cannot be named in order to protect the children's identity, and raises the most fundamental human question of what makes a fit parent — and do social workers have the right to make such judgments?

In this case, the mother, who is 28, has an IQ of 60 and was diagnosed as having a mild learning disability as a child. She went to a special school and learned to read and write, but is candid about the difficulties she has in understanding simple ideas.

Shyly, she explains that she likes to have written instructions so she can absorb them at her own pace, but she takes a full part in our discussions about the

children. The father, who is 37 and her partner of ten years, has also been described as having learning difficulties, despite expert assessments to the contrary.

He is an unsophisticated, gently spoken man, but he takes his responsibilities as breadwinner and father very seriously. He has worked for a large manufacturing company for 22 years, and does much of the housework and cooking.

He also has a detailed grasp of the chain of events that have

destroyed his family, recalling myriad names, dates and official decisions with ease.

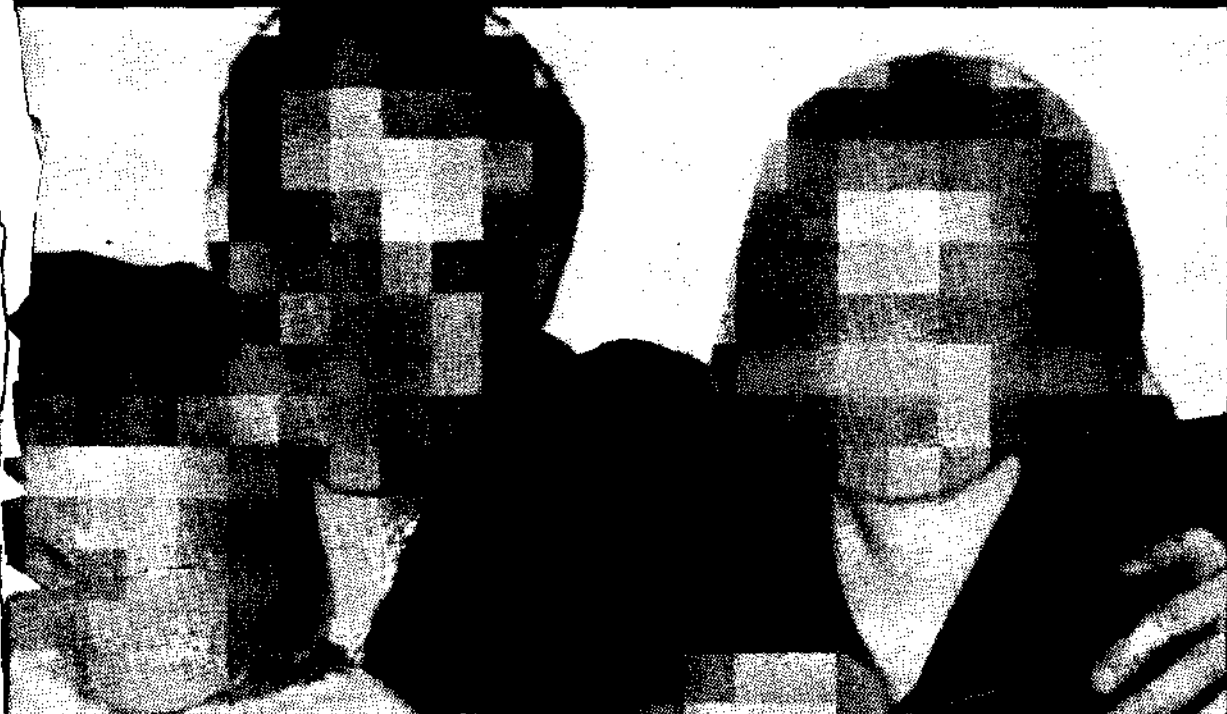
Sitting together in their two-bedroom council flat, their distress is palpable. The mother says: 'I want my children back. Without them I can't live, really.'

'When the social workers say that they have taken them because I don't have a routine for the children, it isn't fair. They say I don't do things the way they want me to.'

'They think I am stupid — but I am not. I have always taught my

In utter secrecy, a loving couple have both their children confiscated and sent for adoption. The reason? Social workers say the parents are too 'slow'. Mail writer FIONA BARTON investigates a truly terrifying scandal

clever enough to have we're taking them away



behind closed doors. Those who protest or challenge this draconian state of affairs are threatened with imprisonment, as a lone county councillor discovered when he took up this couple's case.

Essex County Council took out an injunction to silence Barry Aspinell when he began investigating the case, but he refused to be cowed. The Liberal Democrat councillor risked going to prison for contempt of court in order to bring the case into the public domain, and last week, he won the legal right to discuss it.

He said: 'There has never been any accusation of harm to the children. This is about the parents' IQ. I think it is absolutely disgraceful and heart-rending that the local authority has allowed a section of its operations to make a judgment on people like that. I have called for a full inquiry into this sorry business as a matter of great urgency.'

Essex County Council's General Scrutiny Committee looked at

even welcoming two social workers into the family home between 7.45am and 5.45pm every day for three weeks — but they felt totally betrayed when the official reports on their behaviour were, they say, both inaccurate and unfair.

The first, completed in June 2003, stated that *both* parents had 'some degree of learning disabilities'.

The father flatly denies that he has a disability, and the error was reluctantly acknowledged by the local authority almost a year later.

There was a great deal of detail about the mother's bathroom habits, with a whole section on how long she took to brush her teeth in the morning and the effect this would have on her child.

More seriously, it repeated allegations that the father had a tendency to lose his temper with his partner, although these claims were based on hearsay.

It also stated that the police were called once by a neighbour who claimed to have heard shouting



Torn apart: The parents with their baby son and daughter before they were taken from them

little girl about road safety, and I know about fires and safety. They think she will overtake me and would be helping look after me, but she loved to help with the baby and everything.'

She struggles to control her emotions as she recalls the day her children were taken from her.

'When they took them, I went barmy. I had to go into hospital because I was so upset. We have been trying to get them back ever since.'

'But they have told us the children are having a new forever

mum and dad and that our little girl doesn't like us any more and is not asking for us — and that she is drawing pictures of her new forever mum and dad, not us. It really upsets me.'

The father adds: 'They took the children away because they thought our little girl's development was delayed and her needs were not being met.'

'They said she was slower than others of her age — she was slow in walking and her speech was late developing, but she talked in the end and once she started walking,

she was soon running. Children develop at different rates, don't they?'

'But they said her needs were not being met and that she wouldn't reach her full potential if she stayed with us.'

The case was heard in the family courts, which operate in complete secrecy. These powerful courts, which deal with thousands of families each year, sit without jury or public scrutiny to protect the children involved.

The corollary is that parents are left fighting desperate battles

whether it had been 'over-zealous in placing children with adoptive parents' last year after national concerns were raised about the growing number of adoptions. It reported that Essex 'meets or surpasses all national requirements'.

The committee did, however, concede that there was room for improvement in how the council dealt with birth parents.

Tom Smith-Hughes, chairman of the General Scrutiny Committee, said: 'It is clear that in placing the well-being of children at the centre of the adoption process in line with national policy, more can be done to explain the process to birth parents. I am glad such improvements are being put in place.'

But it appears that for this couple, nothing can stop the final adoption hearing later this month. The couple know there is little they can do, but are adamant that their story should be told.

Their daughter was born a healthy 7lb 13oz in June 2001. The couple had been together for six years, but the baby was unplanned and, they admit, a shock.

The mother developed post-natal depression following a difficult birth, and was put on anti-depressants to help her cope. But she claims she settled down well to motherhood with the help of her partner and health visitors.

It was when the baby girl was three months old that Essex Social Services got involved. There were concerns about the child's weight gain, and a social worker was asked to join the Learning Disabilities Team and health visitors in keeping an eye on the family. But within 12 months, there were ten different professionals involved.

'There has been too much interfering, too many people watching us,' says the mother.

At one stage, the family home was being visited by three family support workers, a children's social worker, two health visitors, an advocate, a community nurse, the learning disability team and a therapist to teach the mother how to make sandwiches.

Hardly surprisingly, being under such daily scrutiny began to take its toll on the couple. Initially, they co-operated with the authorities —

and the baby screaming inside the flat. Essex police confirmed that

Ten different 'professionals' were interfering

they had responded to the call but had 'no concerns at the house, there had been no signs of a disturbance and no one was making any allegations'.

The first report concluded that the child was loved and her parents wanted to do their best for her.

But the mother was accused of failing to provide 'adequate stimulation to allow her to reach her full potential', and there was a warning that if the child had that stimulation she 'may well overtake her mother in her abilities and become her carer'. Whatever happened, the parents couldn't win.

The child was put on the at-risk register by social services two months later under the category of 'Neglect', and the authority applied for an Interim Care Order for the girl in March 2004.

One month later, with the mother pregnant again, a group of professionals involved in the day-to-day care of the family met to decide whether to put the couple's unborn son on the at-risk register as well.

At this meeting, a support worker said a second child would not be any more stressful than for any other mother, and one of the health visitors said that the couple were coping quite well with the right support but that the mother lost confidence when she was put under constant scrutiny by experts.

The issue of the father's temper was raised again, but one local authority worker said that anger-management sessions arranged by the council were discontinued because 'he did not have a problem', and another pointed out that he had lost his temper only when frustrated by interference in his family. Then, in an astonishing volte-face, the meeting voted by

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