

SOCIAL WORKERS

FROM the start, it was clear to Kathy and Arthur Harper that they had adopted two very different little girls, although they were sisters. Jenny, seven, was quiet, affectionate and needed lots of encouragement. Sophie, five, was boisterous, loved attention and easily got out of hand. It didn't matter to the Harpers. After years of being alone, at last they had a family. They loved their two daughters equally and were determined to offer them the idyllic childhood they had so far been denied. For eight years, that is exactly what they had. But now, from the walls of their Victorian villa in



by
**Becky
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Southend-on-Sea are endless photographs of smiling faces, with the girls swimming, horse-riding, at the Brownies and at family picnics. They loved their regular holidays to the seaside, the Lake District and Scotland, and had a thoroughly old-fashioned, stable family life. Today, this dream of offering a happy-ever-after to Jenny and Sophie has been shattered.

Sophie, now 15, drinks, takes hard drugs and dabbles in teenage prostitution and the Harpers are helpless to intervene.

When she started to rebel at the age of 13, they tried to cope, knowing her behaviour was a deep-seated response to the unhappy years before she came to them.

But when, in desperation, they turned to the local social services department in Southend-on-Sea, their problems really started.

For, rather than helping the family to cope, the social workers took Sophie into care. Instead of receiving guidance, she has been shuffled around the country in 14 different foster placements in 18 months. Her behaviour and drug problems are now many times worse.

'We thought that, perhaps, the social workers could arrange for Sophie to have some specialised one-to-one help,' says Arthur, 53, a science lecturer. 'We could not have been more wrong.'

'At one stage,' adds Kathy, 50, a primary school secretary, 'Sophie's social worker, a young woman of about 25, told us that, at 13, Sophie had a "right" to a sex life and that it was "normal" to experiment with drugs.'

'The effect on Sophie has been disastrous. She's gone from bad to worse through mixing with all sorts of disturbed children. Her mood swings are horrendous.'

'Throughout all this, we have visited her every week and tried to have her back home. But we've fallen into the web of "the System" and it seems there is no escape, for us or for Sophie.'

'It is only in sheer desperation that we have sacrificed our privacy to draw attention to the scandalous treatment we have received.'

The Harpers' predicament is a far cry from the high hopes they had ten years ago when they adopted Sophie and Jenny, now 17.

confirm our worst fears,' says Arthur. 'It explained why it was so difficult to look after Sophie.'

'But we did not love her any the less. In fact, our hearts went out to her even more and we wanted to do everything we possibly could to help both her and Jenny.'

Jenny worked hard at school and planned a career looking after mentally handicapped.

But, admits Kathy: 'Sophie did not get easier over the years. We always tried to instill a sense of right and wrong. Increasingly though, we suspected that she had some fairly fundamental psychological problems.'

Things took a dramatic turn for the worse when Sophie hit puberty. Arthur's career led to the family moving to Southend.

Jenny settled in well but for Sophie it was the start of some really difficult behaviour,' says Arthur.

SHE FELL in with a crowd of friends who were mostly in care and who hung around the seedier areas of Southend after dark. 'At 13 or 14, or seven at night, she would start demanding to go out. If we refused, she would just open the front door and run away,' says Arthur.

It soon proved all but impossible to keep Sophie at home in the evening.

'One night, she disappeared with my back was turned,' says Kathy. 'and did not come home until two days the morning. I spent the evening driving around Southend looking for her while Arthur stayed at home with Jenny, who was in tears.'

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The Harpers' predicament is a far cry from the high hopes they had ten years ago when they adopted Sophie and Jenny, now 17.

Kathy says: 'After approaching a private, church-run, adoption agency, we were shown an album of available children. As soon as we saw pictures of Sophie and Jenny, they just leaped out at us.

'We knew very little about the girls' background, but even if we had known then that they had been abused, we would still have taken them on and done our very best for them.'

As discovered through their social worker a few years later, both girls had a miserable start. By the age of three, Sophie had been taken into emergency foster care 22 times. Indeed, as the daughter of an alcoholic prostitute, she was put on the 'at risk' register on the day of her birth.

Jenny, her half-sister, also went into care 26 times in those early years. Both girls' fathers are presumed to be clients of their mother.

'We knew they had been through a lot,' says Kathy, 'but we had a strong relationship and we truly believed we could turn the girls' lives around.'

'At first they had pinched, pale little faces and were very guarded, but as the months went by, they blossomed and the house was full of laughter.'

'Within a couple of months they were calling us Mummy and Daddy and, to us, life seemed absolutely perfect.'

JENNY, a quiet child, loved to help Kathy with the cooking or curl up with her on the sofa watching videos. 'From the start, Sophie was much more lively and outgoing,' recalls Kathy.

But at school, Sophie soon caused concern due to her behaviour in class.

Arthur explains: 'Several teachers said they found her "odd" or "strange". She also was very aggressive, rude to the teachers and often claimed the pupils and teachers were being "mean" to her when this was not the case.'

Sophie was given a Statement of Special Needs and had two years of play therapy. The Harpers are not convinced that the therapy brought any major improvements, but they were happy to try it.

'We were still in contact with our social workers who arranged the adoption and through them we heard that a man was prosecuted for abusing children, including our girls. The details were sketchy, but it did

drive around Southend looking for her while Arthur stayed at home with Jenny, who was in tears.'

Sophie was finally delivered to the family's front door by a very drunk and elderly prostitute. 'Debased as she was, even she was horrified that Sophie had been wandering around the red light district,' says Kathy. And so the pattern was set.

'The final straw came when a neighbour told us Sophie had begged him to buy her alcohol. When he refused, she offered him sex as an incentive.'

In desperation, one night when Sophie was picked up by the police and the emergency social worker was called, the Harpers agreed, at 4am, to have her taken into care.

'At the time, we honestly thought it was the best option for Sophie. We simply could not guarantee her safety and we had to think of what was best for Jenny, too.'

'We were so naive. We thought Sophie would be looked after, given help and counselling. We expected her to be home within a fortnight.'

Instead, Sophie was placed with foster parents in Southend and the Harpers were summoned to a meeting with Sophie's new social worker.

'It was like a Stalinist show trial,' remembers Arthur. 'The social worker was a very young woman who had clearly believed every nonsense Sophie had told her without question. She informed me that I had been violent to Sophie, based on the fact that I had, on occasion, physically carried Sophie back into the house when she ran away.'

'She told us that she "would not have any hesitation" in taking Sophie away for good, and that if we carried on treating Sophie in this way, Jenny, too, could be taken away from us.'

When the Harpers remonstrated, they were accused of 'undermining her role as social worker'.

'We weren't able to talk to Sophie at all,' says Arthur. 'Instead, she told us that Sophie had a "Human Right" to a sex life and that experimenting with drugs was "normal" at her age.'

But Southend Social Services also found it far from easy to help Sophie. 'She was exactly the same with the foster family as she had been with us, running away, drinking and getting into trouble,' says Kathy.

Sophie's first placement lasted just a couple of weeks before she was moved on. It was the beginning of a dramatic downward spiral. 'At first, Sophie was glad to be upsetting us and thrilled by all the attention she was getting,' says Arthur. 'But as she was moved from

STOLE OUR CHILD

With love and great hopes, a highly respectable couple adopted this troubled little girl. But when she rebelled at 13, what did social services do? Tear her away, place her with 14 foster

The lost girl:
Sophie as a
happy,
normal
child



homes and insist she had a 'human right' to a sex life ...



foster home to foster home, she became very depressed.'

No real help was forthcoming. The Harpers asked for a different, more experienced, social worker to take on their daughter's case.

Unknown to them, Sophie, too, had filled in an official complaint form making the same request. The Daily Mail has seen Sophie's complaint, in which she writes: 'She [the social worker] is stirring up trouble between me and my family and making everything worse instead of better.'

Both requests for a more experienced social worker were refused.

Sophie was moved to Maidstone, Kent, and later to Lincolnshire. Each time, the placements broke down after a few weeks.

Arthur says: 'We fought for her to see a psychiatrist as her behaviour was so worrying. Eventually she was assessed by a specialist at the Maudsley Hospital in London who found her to be in urgent need of therapeutic counselling. To date, none has been forthcoming.'

Instead, Sophie has been left to her own devices. 'She was placed in a foster home in Hainault, Essex, for three months last spring, where

she had a dismal, dingy, room. She was thrown out to walk the streets every morning and not allowed home until 5.30pm,' says Kathy.

'We used to visit her every weekend, but in all the time she was there a social worker did not visit her once at the home. She became terribly unhappy.'

And then, in July last year, another crisis put all plans of reuniting the family on hold. Sophie made a suicide attempt by overdosing with paracetamol and stabbing herself with scissors.

'No one from social services even took us,' says Kathy. 'They simply sent her back from the hospital to the same foster home.'

'Twenty-four hours later, she did it again, this time with more pills.'

After the second suicide attempt, the Harpers found out what had happened and insisted that Sophie was moved. Yet another foster placement was found for her in Shoeburyness, near Southend.

Since this crisis last July, Sophie has been moved on again several times. The Harpers have hoped for some professional help to get their daughter back on the straight and narrow. But they are, increasingly

convinced that Southend Social Services are just marking time until Sophie turns 16 this autumn and she is no longer their problem.

'We want to see Sophie given another chance to go back into education, see a proper psychiatrist and start afresh,' says Arthur.

HE ADDS: 'The sad fact is we could not keep her at home. She is a thousand times more volatile and uncontrollable than before she was taken into care. And we have Jenny to think of. She has been badly shaken by all this, to the point where, after her GCSEs, she has decided to take a year out of education just to gather her resources.'

But the Harpers have never given up on their adoptive daughter.

'Wherever she is, we visit every weekend,' says Kathy. 'The day after my last visit, which had been a really happy one spent chatting in the park, I rang the home to speak to Sophie. They said that she had absconded at 1pm the night before, getting into an Audi with a couple in their 20s. The children's home

staff don't even try to stop her leaving and nobody thinks to inform us.'

'Sophie was found by the police a week later, on a street corner in the red light district of Blackpool in the early hours of the morning, and we can only assume the very worst. But the social services department does not even return our calls.'

'The strain is immense; we live in fear of every phone call. We fear that she may not even survive, so dangerous is her lifestyle.'

'She hasn't been to school for a single day in 18 months. Can you imagine the trouble we would have been in if we had allowed her to play truant for 18 months? But because she's in care, nobody bats an eyelid.'

'I am taking anti-depressants and Arthur's blood pressure is sky-high. It's a struggle to get through the day.'

But perhaps the last words in this disturbing tale should go to Sophie. After visiting her parents for Christmas last year, she wrote: 'I love you both more than words can say and I hope you know it. I'm sorry I was such an awful child. I hope that one day things will get sorted.'

It would be cheering to think that, sooner rather than later, Sophie will

receive the help she needs to make those words come true.

■ A SPOKESMAN for Southend-on-Sea Borough Council says: 'As children's corporate parents, Southend's Social Care Department cannot comment on the specifics of this complex case. We have a responsibility to protect and look after all children in our care.'

'Throughout the whole process, our social workers and their team manager have been in contact and consultation with the parents on all aspects of the child's care, including any educational and therapeutic needs.'

'There is no evidence to support the parents' concerns over comments social workers are alleged to have made regarding their parenting skills, and they have not raised these issues with us.'

'The family can ask for any concerns to be investigated and the council will take these complaints seriously. We would like to state categorically that social workers in the employ of Southend-on-Sea Borough Council would not condone teenagers experimenting with drugs or having underage sexual relations.'

■ NAMES have been changed for legal reasons.