

STOLEN

THERE were only five of them at the farewell party. The mother, the grandparents, the baby and the social worker.

The mother, who cannot be identified, held her daughter for the allocated two hours, playing and talking to her as the grandparents wept. At the moment of parting, she kissed her and gave her a small teddy bear and a St Christopher medal to protect her because she no longer could.

'The social worker had to be there throughout and wouldn't even let me change my daughter's nappy without supervision. It was so sad,' the woman says more than six months on from that awful day.

'I just sat with my little girl on my lap and held her. We didn't have much time to start with, but the social worker took her away early because her new family, who were adopting her, wanted to see her.

'I was allowed to give her a present when she left. She has got a picture of me and my mum and dad in her Life Story book for when she is older. It was awful for us all. It was the first time I had seen my dad cry.'

This appalling story told to the Mail this week should give Beverley Hughes, the recently appointed Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, much to think about. It illustrates in tragic detail the growing scandal — exposed by the Mail over the past three months — of enforced adoptions of children whose parents are deemed intellectually 'slow'.

Our investigations have revealed important research which shows the extent of the injustices being done to people with a low IQ or learning disability, and which, until now, has been ignored by the Government as it pursues new targets for the adoption of children in order to reform the care system.

Writing in this paper on Monday, Professor Tim Booth said that people with a learning difficulty are 50 times more likely to be involved in care proceedings than those without, and run a significantly higher risk of losing their children permanently. Pressure groups have told us that hundreds of families with learning disabilities are in daily contact with them about their fears of losing their children.

But if Ms Hughes is unmoved by the statistics, perhaps she will listen to the catalogue of individual tragedies, including this mother who was told to hold the farewell party for her only child.

SHE tells her story with eloquence and dignity, despite being labelled as someone with a low IQ who is unable to follow basic instructions or even cross the road by herself. It is evident that she understands the issues involved in her case and the problems she faces.

Now 32, she lives in the West Country and gave birth early in 2004 to a girl.

'I was in a relationship but the father ran off,' she says. 'Luckily, I had my parents to support me. When my daughter was born everything was normal but she didn't put on weight properly. The health visitor said she had to put on weight or she would have to go to hospital.'

'That's when social services got involved. My little girl had eczema and my mum thought she might be allergic to cow's milk and suggested putting her on goat's milk but they wouldn't listen.

'Her eczema got infected and she was taken into hospital where they did tests and decided that she did have an

Three months ago, we told the horrific story of a family whose children were forcibly taken for adoption because their loving parents were 'too slow.' Today we reveal it is just the tip of the iceberg ... a national scandal of state-sponsored child-snatching being carried out in secret



SATURDAY DISPATCH

protect her because she no longer could.

'The social worker had to be there throughout and wouldn't even let me change my daughter's nappy without supervision. It was so sad,' the woman says more than six months on from that awful day.

'I just sat with my little girl on my lap and held her. We didn't have much time to start with, but the social worker took her away early because her new family, who were adopting her, wanted to see her.

'I was allowed to give her a present when she left. She has got a picture of me and my mum and dad in her Life Story book for when she is older. It was awful for us all. It was the first time I had seen my dad cry.'

This appalling story told to the Mail this week should give Beverley Hughes, the recently appointed Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, much to think about. It illustrates in tragic detail the growing scandal — exposed by the Mail over the past three months — of enforced adoptions of children whose parents are deemed intellectually 'slow'.

Our investigations have revealed important research which shows the extent of the injustices being done to people with a low IQ or learning disability, and which, until now, has been ignored by the Government as it pursues new targets for the adoption of children in order to reform the care system.

Writing in this paper on Monday, Professor Tim Booth said that people with a learning difficulty are 50 times more likely to be involved in care proceedings than those without, and run a significantly higher risk of losing their children permanently. Pressure groups have told us that hundreds of families with learning disabilities are in daily contact with them about their fears of losing their children.

But if Ms Hughes is unmoved by the statistics, perhaps she will listen to the catalogue of individual tragedies, including this mother who was told to hold the farewell party for her only child.

SHE tells her story with eloquence and dignity, despite being labelled as someone with a low IQ who is unable to follow basic instructions or even cross the road by herself. It is evident that she understands the issues involved in her case and the problems she faces.

Now 32, she lives in the West Country and gave birth early in 2004 to a girl.

'I was in a relationship but the father ran off,' she says. 'Luckily, I had my parents to support me. When my daughter was born everything was normal but she didn't put on weight properly. The health visitor said she had to put on weight or she would have to go to hospital.'

'That's when social services got involved. My little girl had eczema and my mum thought she might be allergic to cow's milk and suggested putting her on goat's milk but they wouldn't listen.'

'Her eczema got infected and she was taken into hospital where they did tests and decided that she did have an intolerance to cow's milk. Social services always think they know better but my mum was right.'

Unfortunately, the hospital then reported the woman to social services because, in their view, she was asking too many questions about how to handle the baby.

'I wasn't used to anything and being a new mum, I asked for help with breast-feeding and making up bottles. They decided I couldn't cope and called in social services.'

'They steamrollered in and got us on an interim care order because I was too slow and asking for help all the time. They were going to separate me and the baby but I got a solicitor and we ended up at a mother and baby unit.'

Before that, the woman was required to be assessed and was subject to a bizarre IQ test with a psychologist. 'I was told that because I couldn't match up some silly blocks to a picture in a book, I couldn't follow instructions. But I was under so much stress I couldn't think straight.'

'They said I had an IQ of 79, a borderline learning disability, and couldn't follow

children were forcibly taken for adoption because their loving parents were 'too slow.' Today we reveal it is just the tip of the iceberg ... a national scandal of state-sponsored child-snatching being carried out in secret



SATURDAY DISPATCH

by Fiona Barton

basic instructions or cross the road by myself.

'The psychologist asked stupid questions like "What is the speed of light?" It is 186,000 miles per second — I didn't know and I looked it up afterwards. But what is that to do with parenting?'

'At the time I lived in a flat on my own and I was totally independent and fine. I am taking a GCSE in English and have been studying for a diploma in IT. I went on a charity cycle ride recently from Salisbury to Swanage. Sixty miles on my own and I had to read my own map to find my way. And they said I couldn't cross the road alone. It is ridiculous.'

Having been diagnosed with a low IQ, she and the child were sent to the mother and baby unit in the West Midlands for six months so she could train to be a better parent. She is scathing about the experience. 'I was told it was for six months but I

was kicked out after six weeks. It was supposed to get you ready for the real world but what they do is knock your confidence.

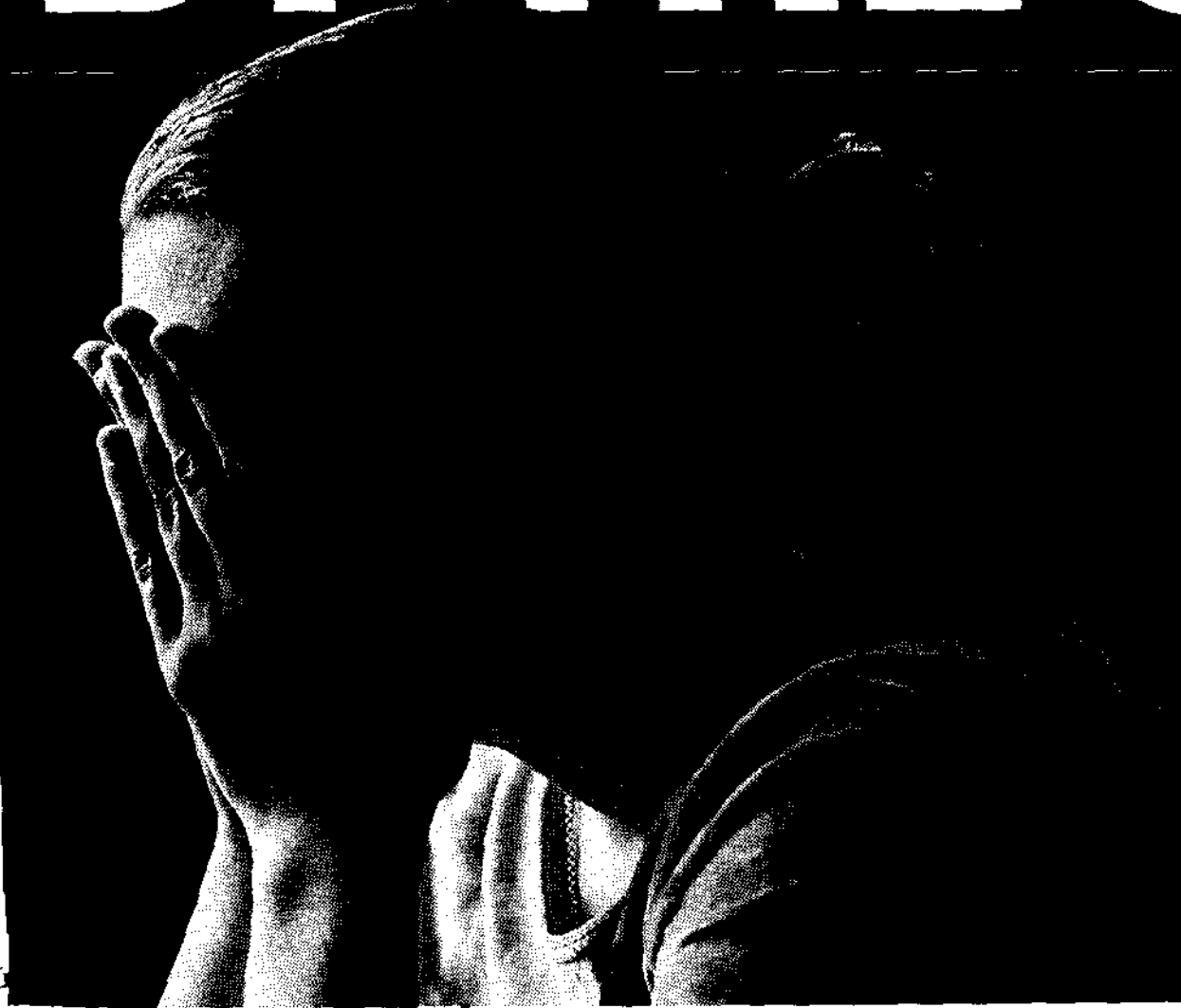
'You are watched all the time. It is like an open prison and nothing I said was confidential — even the counselling I had. After six weeks they took my little girl away and gave me two hours to get out.'

The local authority said she could not cope as a mother and obtained a full care order last year.

The mother says: 'My daughter doesn't even live in this country now, she has been adopted and lives abroad. I was against her being given to a new family but the social services said they didn't need my signature. They could take me through the courts and have her adopted anyway.'

'I had never hurt a hair on her head. I was heartbroken. I wasn't allowed to go to court for the final hearing because I was told it would upset my daughter.' She is

BY THE STATE



learning disability. Her husband — the child's stepfather — is 41, has no disability and holds down a full-time job. They asked for some help from social services with the five-year-old, their eldest child, whose behaviour was increasingly aggressive and disruptive.

Reluctantly, the couple agreed to their son going to stay with foster carers for three months so he could receive therapy. That was two years ago and they are now only allowed to see him once a month.

His mother, a shy, naive woman, is distraught and her distress at what has happened all too obvious.

HE WAS biting and nipping other children and running off and ripping down curtains. I just asked for some respite care and we were told it would be just for three months but he never came back home. The social workers said he had challenging behaviour and we hadn't done enough work with him, but they never said about what sort of work we should be doing.

'They pop in when my husband is at work and ask me to sign things and don't give me time to read them. They bully me and my family into doing things.'

cally to once a month without going back to court or giving the parents written reasons.

They believe the move is an overture to adoption and are in despair at the thought of losing him for ever.

'My son cannot cope without seeing us,' she says. 'A month is a long time to a kiddie of that age and he cries and says he wants to come home. Now they are talking about moving him to a new foster carer when the court said he shouldn't move, except to come home.'

Her husband is a steady influence on his wife and, although she is nervous, he allows her to tell the story in her own words without correcting or interrupting her when she makes a mistake, listening to her carefully.

He appears a decent, hard-working man who plays with his daughter unself-consciously when she becomes tired and fractious during our talk. 'We want him home where he is loved and well looked after,' he says.

'Keeping him from his family is what I term child abuse. There should be a national inquiry into the state of social work today.'

It is the view of an ordinary man caught up in extraordinary circumstances beyond his control and one that deserves the attention and compassion of Beverley Hughes and her Government.

Eric Pickles, the Conservative MP



In torment:
The mother
who has had
her daughter
taken away
from her

Picture: SWNS

convinced she was targeted because of the assessment. 'I was discriminated against because they judged me to be low IQ. The guardian ad litem [independent officer appointed by the court to look after children's rights] asked me if I was using a contraceptive because I had a learning disability.

'She said she didn't want the same thing happening again and she obviously didn't want me to be sexually active. But at the end of the day, I am a woman with feelings.

'No one can treat me as less than other people.'

A growing number of politicians, lawyers and social workers agree. They are outraged by the injustices now being done to people like this woman and are fearful for the future.

They point to the growing power of the Family Courts which are conducted in almost total secrecy, without a jury, in order to protect the identity of the children involved.

As a result, decisions which affect the most basic rights of parents are removed from public scrutiny while draconian rules mean that parents cannot talk to anyone apart from a solicitor about the case. There are

now calls for changes to allow Press reporting of hearings without identifying those involved.

It is a move that Miss C, a social worker with 30 years' experience with children and families, would certainly back.

She cannot be identified because her job would be at risk but she is sufficiently horrified at the 'change of culture' within her own profession and its far-reaching impact to speak out. 'It is a different culture now from when I started.

BEING a social worker has changed from being caring and supportive to help people get through difficult times to a policing role, telling people how they should live. I am ashamed to call myself a social worker sometimes.

'Picking on people with learning disabilities is wrong. They are not focusing on some of the families they should be focusing on because they prefer to work with someone they can easily control.

'It is easier to deal with someone with a low IQ than middle-class, intelligent families who will ask questions, fight decisions and make trouble, or with families on deprived estates who threaten violence. They would rather target vulnerable families and bully them.'

Another social worker claimed that the financial incentives being provided by the Government to encourage local authorities to meet adoption targets were 'putting a price on children's heads'.

'A successful adoption can save a local authority hundreds of pounds a week and boost its star rating. I worry that this and the pressure to raise numbers will affect fairness in the process of adoption.

'Social workers are twin-tracking children — that is they are working on an adoption at the same time as working with the birth family to try to get them back home — to speed things up. It can mean bad, unjust decisions are made.'

Decisions such as the prolonged and cruel separation of one little boy from his family in the North of England.

His mother is 34 and has a mild

into doing things.'

One action that was demanded was the removal of the woman's mother — the child's grandmother — with whom she had always lived, from the family home.

'They made my mum move out of our house and into her own flat because they said we were giving our little boy conflicting messages. Mum was letting him get away with things and we were trying to tell him off. Now they want to know if my mum is here overnight but I don't think it is their business.

'One social worker joked that they would have to fit cameras in the house to see what went on.'

The couple co-operated fully with the increasingly intrusive demands. The mother went on a parenting course and learned cookery and her husband gave up his job to help her.

'We did everything they asked,' she says. 'They said my husband had to stay off work to help me after I had my second baby or she might be taken into care. We were frightened and he stayed off for a year but he wanted to work to support us. I don't think that is a bad thing.

'They don't give us credit for anything. One of the social workers calls us "You lot" and threatens and bullies us so we are afraid to complain. They can do anything they want with us.'

Her son was made the subject of a full care order at the end of last year during a brief, apparently unchallenged court hearing. Yesterday, the mother and grandmother were in tears at the memory.

'An assessment by a psychologist said I could look after two children and the guardian ad litem wanted my son to come home but then she changed her mind and sided with the social services at the hearing,' she explains.

'The court said we should have contact every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. We never managed to see him on a Saturday because social services wanted to watch us constantly and write everything down and the staff didn't work on a Saturday. Now they say that he was getting too excited during the visits and that he was seeing too much of us.'

In May the local authority reduced the family's contact drasti-

Eric Pickles, the Conservative MP for Brentwood and Ongar is raising the issue in the House of Commons and this week wrote to Ms Hughes asking for a meeting.

He has taken up the case of the Essex couple whose plight — as revealed by the Mail — first highlighted the scandal, and told Ms Hughes: 'The mother of the children has an IQ of around 60. While social services sought to present her as stupid to the point of being unable to understand maternal feelings, she is, in my view, just a little slow and loves her children dearly.

FACED with an unending stream of social workers (I counted up to 16) pushing her in different directions, she was left bewildered and unable to adequately cope with putting up a rebuttal for social services' allegations.

'It was very noticeable in the judgment that while the judge took into consideration her learning difficulties in assessing my constituent's adequacy as a mother, the same judge ascribed quite sophisticated motivation with her use of the Press and my involvement in the case.

'I feel very strongly that had my constituents been able to seek advice and support from outside organisations or their elected representative from the beginning they would not now be bereft of their children. I am fearful for the vulnerability of these parents in what appears to be an unequal battle with social services.'

The Essex couple are still struggling to find a way to get their son and daughter back. They have been told by two judges that they have done nothing wrong but that the mother's impaired intellect means they cannot 'meet the emotional needs' of their young children.

Lawyers are now applying for a judicial review of the judge's decision to allow the adoption. The father feels that the Family Courts have let his family down but he cannot give up the fight.

'We will not give up on our children. We are very tired but we must go on with it. Justice must be done.'

are being forcibly taken away to meet adoption targets

THE CHILD STEALERS

By **James Chapman**
and **Fiona Barton**

SOCIAL workers were accused last night of tearing children away from loving families to meet 'performance targets' for adoption.

Experts said there was clear evidence of social services targeting parents they branded 'not clever enough' to raise young children.

Tories demanded an inquiry, warning that the system appeared to be failing people with learning difficulties or low IQs. The call follows a Daily Mail inquiry highlighting the case of an Essex couple whose two small children were taken away and put up for adoption last year. Today the Mail reveals another distressing case involving a

Turn to Page 6, Col. 4

The targets that split families

Continued from Page One

32-year-old mother who says her baby girl was taken into care because she was deemed to have a 'borderline learning difficulty'.

Her daughter was adopted by a foreign couple and now lives abroad.

In the case of the Essex couple, however, the chance of a successful adoption is fading. Their baby boy developed hydrocephalus after he was taken away from them, two prospective adopters pulled out and he may never find a new family.

There are fears that Government attempts to speed up the adoption process - social services are urged to see it as a 'positive, responsible choice' - are distorting decisions about vulnerable families. Councils are accused of being too quick to turn to adoption in a desire to meet 'performance targets'.

Since Labour came to power, the number of children in care has increased almost 20 per cent.

The Disability Rights Commission, the watchdog set up to stop discrimination against disabled people, said last night there was 'serious concern' that parents with learning difficulties were

**Stolen by the state:
Pages 16 & 17**

being unfairly targeted. Research suggested that one in four children subject to care orders had a parent with a learning difficulty.

Tory spokesman Theresa May said it was 'deeply worrying' that the system was failing such children and their parents.

She said MPs were being inundated with letters from people who had children taken away in similar circumstances. Parents with low IQs found it 'impossible to cope with the system'.

Mrs May said there were now more than 61,000 children in care, the highest figure in over 20 years and an increase of 20 per cent since 1997.

But the prospects for children taken into the care system were

'appalling'. They were two and a half times more likely to become teenage parents and 66 times more likely to have their own children taken into care.

Between a quarter and a third of people sleeping rough had been in care.

Mrs May said: 'Anyone can see that it must be better for these children for us to support their parents and try to prevent them from being taken into care.'

The Education Department said last night: 'The decision to remove a child is not made lightly and responsibility for making those difficult decisions rests with the courts. All involved work on the basis that the welfare of the child is paramount.'

<p>Your Daily Mail</p> <p>If your copy of today's Daily Mail does not include Weekend, it is not the fault of your newsagent.</p>	<p>Please call the helpline on freephone 0800 200250 between 8am and 8pm today or e-mail us at helpline@dailymail.co.uk and we will send them to you without delay.</p>
--	---