

Foster parents not told of horror ordeal

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IN January 2001, a 19-year-old man, who is now serving life in prison, climbed through the bathroom window of a house in suburban Adelaide.

He cut the telephone line, found a sleeping child, held scissors to her throat and raped, beat and bit her.

When her foster carer — a distant relative — awoke, he strangled her.

The rape and murder took place over several hours. A judge said later that the child, who had been in foster care since she was three, had suffered a "degrading, humiliating, terrifying attack".

The girl's belongings were packed up, and after being moved several times, she ended up in the home of Ruth Macfarlane, a nurse and mother of three adult children, and her husband, Mark, a school counsellor and a teacher of special-needs children.

Like most foster parents, they were never told what had happened to the girl who came to live with them.

"We were told -- and I'll never forget this — that she was just a sad little girl," said Ms Macfarlane. "But that really didn't explain the way she was behaving."

From the start, the girl's behaviour was bizarre, she said.

"It was highly emotional. She was barely a teenager when she came to us, but she had a highly sexualised manner.

"We pleaded for information, but we were given no expert advice on how to handle it. She was clearly very disturbed by something, but she wasn't receiving any counselling."

Ms Macfarlane says social workers delivered a large box of



Pleas for information: Michael and Ruth McFarlane at home

the girl's belongings to the house.

When she opened the box, she found filthy clothes, some of which were "sexy and totally inappropriate for a child her age. I simply wept".

She was finally forced to go through old newspapers to find out about the girl's background. "I was horrified," she said.

But not alone — foster parents across the nation complain they do not receive enough, or in some cases any, information about the children in their care.

"It's one of the main complaints," says professor Freda Briggs, of the University of South Australia. "It basically adds up to foster parents being treated like second-class citizens — like they have no right to know who is living in their home, like the social workers just know best."

A debate will be held during the national foster care conference in

Adelaide this weekend on whether foster carers should be given professional status. This would involve pay, training and information about the children they care for.

They would also be given a greater role in deciding the children's future. Currently, the emphasis is on family reunification.

Foster parents report being traumatised by the idea of children who have been thriving in their homes suddenly being sent back to family members who have convinced social workers they are off drugs or out of abusive relationships.

Ms Macfarlane said a young social worker once told her: "You don't make the decisions. I've got a university degree." Another said: "We can give you training in parenting skills." Ms Macfarlane was appalled. "We had this girl, who was drinking out of a

baby's bottle. As far as we could tell, she had only ever eaten noodles in a cup, and packet soup. She had been in the care of the department (in Adelaide) since she was three. And they are telling me I needed to get parenting advice?"

At school, the girl drew sexually explicit pictures in her student notebook. When Ms Macfarlane discovered and reported this, she was told she "had invaded her privacy".

She was also told that the results of the child's psychological assessment "were none of your business".

The social workers seemed to be intent on reuniting the girl with her mother, despite the fact the woman had never lived with the child since abandoning her as a baby in hospital.

"They were obsessed with reunification," Ms Macfarlane said. "They weren't interested in the mother's history, the drug abuse, the damage she had already done to the child."

She said the mother wrote letters to the girl, describing Ms Macfarlane as "the old witch" and telling the girl: "Come back to me, I'm losing hope." The teenager, already troubled, would become extremely distressed.

The Macfarlanes believe their experience is typical of contact with bureaucrats. "They ignore evidence of sexual abuse, ignore evidence of neglect by family members, force children into contact with abusive relatives, fail to provide support services, use inexperienced and immature social workers, and postpone treatment of children to avoid incurrins costs"