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Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

Save the children

The killing of a toddler and sexual abuse of his sister demand answers as to why parents are allowed to retain custody of children they fail to protect, reports **Christine Jackman**

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SHE abandoned her children to the full-time care of two men she had just met at a train station, without asking for their last names and without leaving her phone number.

Three weeks later, her three-year-old son had been anally raped and repeatedly given electric shocks before dying of indeterminate causes. Her six-year-old daughter, who had almost certainly witnessed her little brother's agonising last hours, had also endured multiple sexual assaults.

And yet at the trial of the monster who had destroyed her children's lives, "Renae Lennon" could barely make the effort to reply to questioning by the Crown prosecutor, who was seeking to put serial sex offender William Thomas Clare away for murder. If the 35-year-old prostitute and nursing home aide displayed any emotion at all, it was resentment at being called to the witness box.

Asked if her son "Jeremy" had shown any changes in behaviour in the weeks leading up to his horrific death, Lennon replied: "Yes, he became more obnoxious."

As usual for Lennon (whose name has been changed only to protect the identity of her daughter "Bianca", now a state ward) it was a striking understatement and startling in its lack of empathy for her children's wellbeing.

An in-depth examination of evidence tendered in the two trials of Clare, including several statements by Lennon herself, reveals that alarm bells should have been ringing for her by the night of her son's murder.

Her two boisterous, fair-haired offspring were crying out for help from the person who nature -- and the law in Australia -- decrees should care most: their mother.

Jeremy did not just become "more obnoxious" during the time he had spent in the grubby one-bedroom flat shared by Clare and 64-year-old Keith Coles, a pensioner and former council worker.

The little boy, who had been fully toilet-trained for almost a year, had suddenly begun urinating on the carpet, as if somehow reluctant to go into the bathroom.

Bianca's behaviour had changed, too. She was "more cheeky", Lennon said in later interviews, and had begun answering her mother back when Clare brought the children to visit her for an hour or two each afternoon.

But by Saturday, September 13, 2003, Bianca was clearly desperate for her mother's help. As Lennon made salami-and-cheese sandwiches for dinner, Bianca revealed she was "angry" at Clare because he would not stop "looking at her private parts".

It was the sort of statement that would make most parents' blood run cold. Even Lennon, who by then had a long history of leaving her children in filthy circumstances or with inappropriate carers (at least one, and possibly two, of whom had already sexually interfered with Bianca), recognised the distress in her daughter's voice.

"I think she was too scared to tell me (more)," Lennon said in an interview less than a week after Jeremy's death.

"She was upset. She didn't want it to happen, you could tell."

But, as in the courtroom during Clare's trial, Lennon could not find the interest or the energy to act on behalf of her children.

"I wanted to talk to him (Clare) about why he was looking at her and (tell him) not to," she said later, "but my head was throbbing over my left eye and he said, 'I'll take the kids over to my place so you can get some rest'. That was the last time I saw my son alive."

In October 2004, Clare was sentenced to 16 years' jail for raping Bianca at least five times in the week before Jeremy's death.

Last week he was also found guilty of the little boy's manslaughter, after admitting to anally raping and repeatedly shocking him with the 240-volt current from an exposed power cord. He remains in Goulburn prison and will be sentenced at a later date.

But has justice been done? For the politically correct, and those whose ideology casts women as perpetual victims

rather than protagonists in their own lives, perhaps. But for those who believe a parent is ultimately responsible for the care and wellbeing of their children, two questions still hover like ghosts around the memory of Jeremy Lennon. The first: why was Renae Lennon allowed to walk away from the Supreme Court in Sydney, still surly, resentful and apparently absolved of any responsibility for her children's miserable fate?

The second: why are government authorities who are charged with protecting children, and given budgets running to billions of dollars of taxpayers' money to do so, rarely held accountable when at-risk children are left without help until they are physically broken, sexually degraded or dead?

Tragically, the case of Bianca and Jeremy Lennon is no aberration. In the year Jeremy died, so too did 83 other children known to the Department of Community Services in NSW alone. In 2004, the last year for which these type of figures are publicly available, 72 such children died.

Reviewing these deaths, NSW Ombudsman Bruce Barbour said many of these fatalities had "no connection to child protection concerns".

But dozens of other children died after DoCS had repeatedly closed their files without further investigation, even when rated "Priority One" or high risk, or because case workers had been given "informal undertakings" by mothers that things would improve.

One such "undertaking" was made by Renae Lennon in July 2001, after the woman's two flatmates took Jeremy to hospital when he returned from a visit to Renae's parents with severe bruising around his throat and jaw. While at the hospital, Bianca disclosed to a nurse that "I have a sore wee-wee".

Notes from a subsequent medical examination state she "promptly parted her labia without requiring this specifically", an act considered unusual in a child who is sexually naive. Doctors found foreign pubic hair during the exam, supporting Bianca's revelations that "John", Lennon's boyfriend at the time, had "put his nuts in my wee-wee" and "I've sucked (them)".

Concerned hospital staff told DoCS that Lennon appeared "flat" and disinterested in her daughter's stomach-churning disclosure.

But the case worker ultimately decided the children should remain in her care, insisting that DoCS give her further support and that Lennon had given an "informal undertaking" to keep her boyfriend away from the children.

Within three weeks, however, Lennon moved house and DoCS was unable to track her down -- until the children turned up two months later, alone in a filthy flat, with nothing but bread crusts to eat and wearing urine-soaked clothes.

When confronted with such harrowing evidence of their failures, the official response from DoCS has usually been that the department is chronically under-resourced or that it is in the process of implementing a five-year, \$1.2 billion reform package begun in 2003.

With close to 200,000 reports of child neglect or abuse received each year, it is true the department faces a Herculean task.

But is demanding more money and more case workers the only answer? A small but growing band of children's advocates are beginning to speak out, to point the finger at a prevailing orthodoxy within the social work and legal professions that assumes "a bad mother (or family) is better than no mother at all". Rosemary Sheehan, a pre-hearing conference convenor at the Melbourne Children's Court and self-described social worker of the "older generation", is one who takes the "heretical" view that some people should simply never be allowed to be parents.

Sheehan, whose work on decision-making in child protection cases is internationally recognised, says these are often people who have themselves been abused as children, or have serious drug or alcohol addictions, or suffer mental health problems or intellectual disabilities.

"It's immensely sad, but in my experience there are people who neither have the capacity nor the motivation to parent," Sheehan says. "They don't attach at all (to their children) and they have neither the insight nor the empathy to care for them properly."

She says social work previously drew on medical training, particularly in psychiatry, that acknowledged some people had suffered such damage, either through abuse, drugs or their own genetic history, that their brains simply did not have the capacity to "love" their children adequately.

But in the 1980s an "explosive shift" replaced this approach with an assumption that "all parents love their children, and if something goes wrong, if they show aberrant behaviour, there are socio-economic or class reasons for that". Sheehan explains: "If you ask these workers why haven't they removed certain children, they would say a child is better off with their parents and that the mother will somehow 'get it' and change, given the right services and support. But all the services in the world can only work where a parent is motivated to change and has the capacity to do so.

"It's a complete failure to see the child as an individual. We don't want to 'revictimise' the mother so we victimise the child instead."

A plethora of anecdotal evidence also suggests many social workers single-mindedly support the mother, often without examining alternatives, particularly grandparents or fathers.

In the Lennons' case, the children's paternal grandmother, Judith Graham, says their father "Sam" was cut out of their lives after Lennon and her family demanded he move out.

His child-support cheques were never cashed, dates for contact visits were cancelled and phone calls with the

children undermined, and boxes of toys and clothes sent for Christmas and birthdays were returned unopened to the paternal family.

The first time they learned of the shocking abuse and neglect of the children was when a DoCS worker rang Graham after Jeremy's death, to tell her to be in court for a custody hearing for Bianca.

Minutes later, the home fax whirred into life and began spewing out page after page of horrific detail of Bianca's sexual abuse.

"Before then they had never told my son anything, so we just didn't know," Graham says. "We held out a lifeline so many times. But, in the end, I had to tell myself that she was their mother, that she had the support of her mother, and that surely she would care for her children.

"You look back and you feel guilty. You think, 'if only I had done this or that, if only I'd done more'. I'll probably feel that way for the rest of my life."

They are poignant, heart-rending words. If only Renae Lennon, or the many social workers who were loath to "revictimise" her, had felt the same.