

System 'put parental right' before children's safety

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VICTORIA'S child protection system had a culture of minimal intervention that favoured parents' rights over the safety of children.

The damning assessment by child welfare experts came as Premier Steve Bracks described as "horrific" a case in which a baby suffered electrical burns and lived in squalor for two years before welfare authorities removed her from her drug-addicted Aboriginal mother..

The Australian reported yesterday that the state Department of Human Services was told of concerns for the girl's safety in March 2001, when the child was just two months old.

Despite the woman's first child being placed in foster care, the girl, who witnessed repeated domestic violence and lived in appalling conditions among piles of cat faeces, was not removed until January 2003.

The department refused yesterday to explain why it took 22 months to remove the child,

Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive Joe Tucci said the department should have acted sooner for the girl.

According to a decision by the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, the department was told about concern for her safety in March and October 2001.

Three months after the second report, the girl received serious electrical burns to her foot requiring skin grafts. A supervision order was made in the Children's Court in March 2002 but the mother continually breached it,

turning up to the department with the girl, high on drugs.

"Given a child had already been removed from the family, the supervision order wasn't strong enough," Dr Tucci said.

"I think some of the decisions of the Children's Court have been oriented too much towards parents' rights rather than the safety of children."

A department spokesman said the Government had recently introduced changes to the child

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Saying it could not comment on a specific case for legal reasons.

Chris Goddard, director of Monash University's Child Abuse and Family Violence Unit said the case showed child protection systems across the country were poorly monitored.

"Children are extraordinarily vulnerable yet for some reason we have the least scrutiny of what actually occurs," he said. "Any scrutiny tends to be minimalist and there is no independent scrutiny until the horror stories come before the courts."