

DOES SHE LOOK LIKE
A TROUBLEMAKER?
Some schools would say yes.

SUSPENDED!



POW **A KINDERGARTNER WHO TOLD FRIENDS SHE'D SHOOT THEM WITH HER BUBBLE GUN**

POW **TWO 6-YEAR-OLDS WHO USED FINGERS AS GUNS DURING COPS AND ROBBERS**

POW **A BOY, 7, WHO JUST HAPPENED TO CHEW HIS BREAKFAST PASTRY INTO THE SHAPE OF A GUN AND SAY "BANG!"**

by Ginny Graves

We know what you're thinking right now: "Wait . . . what? Are these real kids? (Yes.) And they were suspended from school why? For basically acting like kids? (Pretty much.) Well, my child does stuff like that all the time. We just call it *playing*." (Exactly.)

Where did these students go wrong? They all had the misfortune of colliding with their school's zero-tolerance policy—a one-size-fits-all punishment, often including suspension, that covers a broad range of different infractions. While the intentions of these policies are well-meaning, their all-or-nothing stance is leaving many young children branded as threats and suffering serious consequences as a result.

Kelly Guarna's 5-year-old daughter, Madison, was one of them. After making the bubble gun comment, she was suspended for 10 days and was afraid to go to school for weeks. "Madison thought her teachers were mad at her. She kept apologizing

and saying she didn't mean to do anything wrong. It was heartbreaking," says Guarna, who needed a lawyer to help her get the suspension removed from her daughter's permanent record. "I understand that we need to do everything we can to reduce school violence, but I don't think treating 5-year-olds as if they're criminals is going to help."

EXTREME DISCIPLINE DOESN'T WORK

When schools started adopting these policies in earnest about 15 years ago, the hope was that they would create better learning environments, which is why you'll find them in pre-Ks right on up through high schools. "The assumption was that zero tolerance would make schools safer, make discipline more consistent, and reduce future problems by sending a strong message to students," says Russell Skiba, Ph.D., a professor of school psychology at Indiana University. But over the last several years, research has shown that it hasn't worked that way.

Not only have school violence rates remained virtually unchanged, but academic performance hasn't improved either. In fact, a 2008 review by the American Psychological Association's Zero Tolerance Task Force concluded that achievement may actually be *lower* in schools with harsher discipline. Worse yet, the policies can set kids up for more setbacks later. "The best predictor of suspension or expulsion is having been suspended or expelled," says Walter Gilliam, Ph.D., associate professor of child psychiatry and psychology at the Yale Child Study Center. "Forcing kids out of school puts them more at risk, not less."

The reason why is pretty simple: "There's no nuance, consideration of context, or allowance for a child's developmental maturity," says Rhonda Armistead, a past president of the National Association of School Psychologists. In other words, it takes common sense out

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A THIRD GRADER'S CUPCAKE TOPPERS WERE REMOVED BY HIS SCHOOL BECAUSE THE SOLDIERS WERE "ARMED."

of the equation and deprives kids of the opportunity to truly understand the mistakes that they've made. "Young children learn from immediate consequences and conversation about what happened, just like they do when you discipline them at home," says Armistead. "Anything beyond that is overkill—and it may backfire by making kids feel alienated from school."

That's exactly what happened when Stephen Grafton's 6-year-old son was suspended for playing cops and robbers at school. "In my mind, this could have been a teaching moment—a chance to tell the kids at the school, 'We don't shoot at each other, and here's why,'" says Grafton, who's an army sergeant stationed at Fort Bragg, NC. "Instead, the principal just sent my son home without explaining what he had done wrong. It was a missed opportunity that left my son scared and confused and me angry and upset. Before this happened, I didn't even know that kids this young could be suspended."

HOW TO GET IT RIGHT

Despite the recent rash of extreme discipline, though, there are signs that the tide may be turning. Spurred in part by a new federal initiative, a number of schools around the country are adopting fresh approaches that focus on teaching kids about appropriate behavior rather than punishing them for their mistakes—and studies have revealed positive results. One really great part for parents? You can adapt their techniques at home to create a less chaotic, more productive, happier family life.

Catch 'em in the act

Teachers at the 650-student Vena Avenue Elementary School in Arleta, CA, hand out tickets that say "Caught Being Good" when kids follow the school's three behavioral expectations: be safe, be responsible, and be respectful. "When students misbehave, we talk to them about what went wrong and help them fill out a problem-solving worksheet so that they have a chance to reflect on

their actions and what they might do differently next time," says Maria Nichols, the school's principal. Since the program launched four years ago, discipline problems reported to Nichols' office have dropped from about three a day to three or fewer a week. Just as important, the school's Academic Performance Index score has risen by 157 points. "I attribute it to having a consistent, systematic approach to discipline," says Nichols. "Kids are in the classroom, instead of sitting in my office or being sent home, and they understand how to behave, because they hear it all the time."

The technique (called Positive Behavioral Support in edu-speak) focuses on preventing discipline problems by creating a positive school culture, where appropriate behavior is taught along with the three R's. "From day one, the school defines three to five positive character traits or expectations, and teachers start working with kids on what that looks like in the classroom, on the playground, and in the lunchroom," says George Sugai, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education. For instance, if one expectation is "respect others," teachers and kids talk about what that means—paying attention in class, keeping your hands to yourself, standing up to bullying on the playground, not cutting in line, and not throwing food in the cafeteria—and teachers reward kids for doing well.

TRY IT AT HOME Talk to your kids regularly about your expectations for their behavior and notice when they get it right. Turn misbehavior into a teachable moment by helping them strategize what they could do differently next time.

Make kids the experts

Classes at SOAR Elementary School in Denver also work together to create a shared list of behavior

expectations. And when kids break the rules, teachers respectfully intervene before behavior gets too far off track. For instance, if children are playing wildly on the swings, the teacher will say, “Stop. Remind me how you can use the swing safely. Go ahead and show me.” And when the child demonstrates the appropriate behavior, the teacher says, “Okay, now you’re swinging safely.” Having kids tell you what’s expected empowers them to do the right thing. When they explain the rules, those limits start to become hard-wired into kids’ brains, making them easier to remember next time.

TRY IT AT HOME As soon as misbehavior starts, calmly and firmly nip it in the bud by asking your child to demonstrate or explain appropriate behavior.

Have daily get-togethers

“We hold morning meetings every day where we not only teach social skills, like how to welcome one another, how to be inclusive, and how to be kind, but where we also try to give kids a sense that they matter and that they belong to the community—all of which helps deter behavior problems,” says Gianna Cassetta, co-executive director of SOAR Elementary. That sense of connectedness can boost achievement, too. University of Virginia researchers recently completed a three-year study of the Responsive Classroom approach in 24 elementary schools and found that students’ math and reading scores improved—and the effect on math scores was stronger in students who were initially low achieving.

TRY IT AT HOME A daily family meeting might be tricky to swing, so aim for a weekly one instead. Each person should have a chance to share something, whether it’s a hilarious cartoon or how they felt after doing whatever not-so-good thing. The more comfortable your children feel about expressing a range of emotions, the better you’ll be able to work through problems.

Ginny Graves lives near San Francisco, CA, and frequently writes about parenting and education.

ZERO TOLERANCE CUTS COMMON SENSE OUT OF THE EQUATION

THE PRINCIPAL CALLED! WHAT NOW?

Most teachers and administrators have the school’s—and your child’s—best interests at heart. If you think the punishment is unfair, schedule a sit-down, suggests Mark Terry, president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. “Most principals will give you the opportunity to work it out,” says Terry.

Rules for getting suspensions erased vary by state and even district, so it pays to familiarize yourself with the specifics in your area. Check the school’s and district’s website, and if you can’t find the rules, ask the superintendent. If you don’t get satisfaction, think about hiring an education advocate, who is familiar with local policies and can speak on your child’s behalf. A lawsuit should always be a last resort, says Maryland attorney Robin Ficker.



BRIGHT IDEA!

If your child is being unfairly punished, document every meeting with the school to avoid misunderstandings later.

Kelly Guarna A MOM WHO'S FIGHTING ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICIES