Handcuffing of a 5 year old girl in a Florida Kindergarten

Westlake Village, Ca. How did we get to having 3 Police officers in Florida Handcuff a 5 year old restless Girl in a Kindergarten? Watch the video footage online here: http://abclocal.go.com/kabc/news/-433-5_nw_jhandcuffed.html

This article is based solely on what can be seen on the video footage shot onsite. Any assumption made by myself will be stated clearly so as to contain the comments in their proper framework.

In the following paragraphs there are two situations I will comment on separately. The first is the attitude of the young girl in school, my assessment of her disturbance and how the teacher ‘handles’ the situation. I will emphasize how a Montessori trained teacher could have generated a better outcome much earlier in the process and in a proper Montessori environment. Secondly, the actual scene where 3 police officers are seen handcuffing the young girl although she seems to pose no threat.

The Onset
The video footage starts out with the teacher and the assistant principal offering the girl 2 options to choose from: one office or another. I can’t imagine how a 5 year old would have the ability to discern which one of those to be the ‘right’ choice. The only ‘clue’ she had was the adults telling her what they want of her. And they were the ones she was defying.

The largest mistake in my opinion was to empty the classroom of all other children. Although I assume this was done for safety reasons, the net effect was to empower the young girl with as close to supernatural powers as one could have been. From there on, any way back would be painful. We’ll also assume that the adults did not want to physically grab the child to relocate the situation in a more controlled environment away from the other children which led to all of them having to exit the classroom.

For a Montessori educator this action leads to dramatizing the events not only for the girl but for all the children. It also exposes them to additional risks by disrupting the flow of the day’s activities and having to exert a certain amount of crowd control during the displacement of the children. We’ll assume here that for the teachers and the assistant principal this was a lesser evil than physical displacing the girl to move her to another location.

Although, removing the girl from the classroom and handling the situation outdoors would have been my first choice I cannot hypothesize on all the possibilities that were available as a resource to the teachers since we don’t have enough information on the actual premises.

The Tantrum
Observing the young girl’s misbehavior, I don’t see an out-of-control child going through a crisis where all communication is lost. Although she seems to not respond to the teacher’s ‘orders’ she does by doing exactly the opposite of what is demanded. Did that ever happen in your household? Those are situation that arise from time to time and there is no point in talking and much less yelling at the child. In those situations, we must first let the individual (not only a child) settle down until we can resume conversation to learn what’s bothering them and how we can help alleviate the situation. This was clearly not the case with the young girl. The teacher and assistant principal stay calm and at the same time want things to happen their way with no apparent regard for what is now important to the girl. They stay standing up straight, a sign of authority. When we talk to a child we almost always crouch down to their eye level. It improves communication and shows respect for their situation while creating an intimacy favorable to openness and exchange.

The young girl in the video seemed to be in a mood to extreme boredom as a consequence of which she was challenging her adult teachers by ripping things off the walls and messing up anything she could, including throwing papers on the floor.

It is my intimate belief that in a proper Montessori environment this would not have gone that far as those types of schools with properly trained Montessori educators create a wholly beneficial environment for all the
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Ms Isabelle comments: 5/13/2005

The mood of the classroom exerts positive or negative inertia to all individual children and adults also. We are responsible for guiding the classroom in the positive direction where children can be absorbed by the task they’re working on and giving each other a helping hand. Therefore, a disruptive child will almost never single handedly affect the rest of the classroom. On the contrary, we’ve many times observed how children cover their ears when one screams. But they are genuinely concerned when a child cries because of hurt feelings. As an aside, it is my contention that children cry more often because of hurt feelings than as a consequence of physical pain, even when they trip and fall. If they start crying it is more often out of frustration and if the adults cater to that behavior, they will train the child to keep reacting in that fashion. That’s why we always ask “are you hurt?” and if they say ‘yes’ we ask where and care for them. But usually they say no, and stop crying, turn around and run off to play with their fellow friends or resume their work.

Therefore, even though this would have been a difficult situation for any teacher in any school, a Montessori environment could have benefited all parties involved by providing the appropriate and nurturing environment children need and can thrive in. Most importantly it would have helped prevent the undesirable outcome of those desperate turns of events. To the credit of the teacher who was with her in the office, she handled the situation pretty well given the circumstances. She stayed calm and tried not to physically interact with the child except to absorb punches she may have thrown. Although, her reactions were directly opposing the girl’s actions by even cornering her and not redirecting her energy and mental focus on something constructive like a Montessori educator would have applied herself to do.

The Handcuffing Scene
As for the grand finale where the young girl is handcuffed behind her back –regardless whether they used the metal ones or the nylon ties-, I am outraged at anyone even thinking of this procedure being appropriate, given the absence of any threatening situation. When you watch the videos, you can see that at the time the police officers come into the office she is sitting, nervously but quietly in a chair, waiting for some sort of resolution. The police actually disrupt that quietness by pulling her out of the chair and tying her arms behind her back. A traumatizing experience, no matter what caused these actions to take place.

In my opinion, these actions where absolutely not called for. She was not harming anyone nor any property, had no weapon whatsoever and did not pose any threat to anyone at the time of the handcuffing, nor during the moments immediately leading up to it. That besides the fact that she probably weights one fifth or less than any one of the adults present and could easily be controlled physically if need be.

A more helpful use of the police uniform would have been to sit next to her at the table, waiting for her mother to pick her up. She was certainly impressed enough by the uniforms to not think about ripping off anymore papers off the walls or misbehaving. But for a school official to even call the police in such a harmless situation is out of this world and shows their inability to handle situation appropriately. This most likely occurred out of the fear of liabilities following physical handling of the girl. And then again, as prophecies predict, at some point in time, truth will seem stranger than fiction.

In Closing
Please do not infer in any way that the girl’s behavior was acceptable. Remember that we benefit from 20/20 hindsight. What we’re discussing here is the handling of a difficult situation for which any adults interacting with children on a daily basis should be properly trained.

Yours truly in better education

Ms Isabelle
Info@IsabelleEtter.com