

Can difficult childhood behavior become criminal?

I recently heard about the arrest of a six-year-old black girl taken from her kindergarten class by the chief of police in Avon Park, Florida. She had a meltdown the school was unable to handle. When Bob Herbert of the New York Times interviewed him, the chief assured him this was not the first six-year-old they had arrested. Apparently, school districts across the country are criminalizing very young children, a large percentage of whom are black, and “have turned away from traditional education-based disciplinary methods...and are looking to the legal system to handle even the most minor transgressions.” What have we become? Herbert is absolutely right when he says, “Once you adopt the mindset that ordinary childhood misbehavior is criminal behavior, it’s easy to start seeing young children as somehow monstrous.” This assumption that a child’s out of control behavior is criminal leads us to outrageous reactions that can destroy a child’s life.

Can any of us imagine what it must have felt like to be that terrified little black girl being pulled out from under a table by a policeman, handcuffed around her upper arms (handcuffs weren’t made for six-year-olds wrists), driven to the police station alone in the back of a police car, finger-printed, and put behind bars? Desre’e Watson is now a felon in the eyes of the law. She was charged with battery on a school official, disruption of a school function and resisting a law enforcement officer. Anyone want to bet on the odds for her future behavior?

Have we landed at the bottom of the “slippery slope?” We begin descending when we perceive a child’s misbehavior as intentional, belligerent, and disobedient. Continuing in that direction holding that perception, a parent or teacher reacts with anger, blame, and punishment in an attempt to stop the behavior. This reaction further fuels the child’s inappropriate reactions. The cycle continues. In Avon Park it resulted in a charge of criminal intent warranting arrest. We usually don’t go that far, but that is the direction we are headed when we perceive inappropriate behavior as belligerent and

calculated—"He's out to get me". If we can understand that kind of behavior as a cry for help, we can turn the corner and head back toward sanity.

Why is it that we think that children's behavior will improve when we make them feel worse than they already do? Do we really think that if a child is handcuffed and arrested, she will be scared out of ever behaving like that again? And if she is, what is the cost of that fear? I wouldn't presume to say that it could result in the criminal behavior of a school killing like Columbine or Virginia Tech—there are way too many variables at play—but what good can that fear do? Surely it will lead to angrier and angrier behavior. Surely she will never understand that these adults were simply misguided and ignorant—that she was not the one at fault. Fear is always hiding below angry behavior. Her behavior is a screaming red flag of emotional turmoil. We can understand the exasperation and anger of her teacher, but what happens to a child's life when that exasperation becomes accusation—god forbid resulting in a mindset of criminality?

This child needs help getting back on track and feeling in balance with her world. Only then will her behavior change, because her behavior is a reflection of her emotional state. We need to see that a child like Desire'e clearly *has* a problem instead of seeing her as such a problem as to require police intervention. Desire'e is being forced to look into many mirrors, perhaps every day, that reflect back to her what a bad, undeserving disappointment she is. This reflection will continue to confirm her belief that she is indeed a bad, undeserving disappointment. She then has no choice but to act that way. To turn things around, adults must understand that children want to succeed, want to please, want to do the right thing, until adults, who don't know any better, get in their way and present obstacle after obstacle. Desire'e has already, in her short life, been pulled far off her track. By what, we don't know. But her behavior, and that of so many children who misbehave, is a cry for help that must be paid attention to if we want things to change. Poor Desire'e is on the road to failure, possibly real criminal behavior, fully and absolutely put there by many of the adults in her life.