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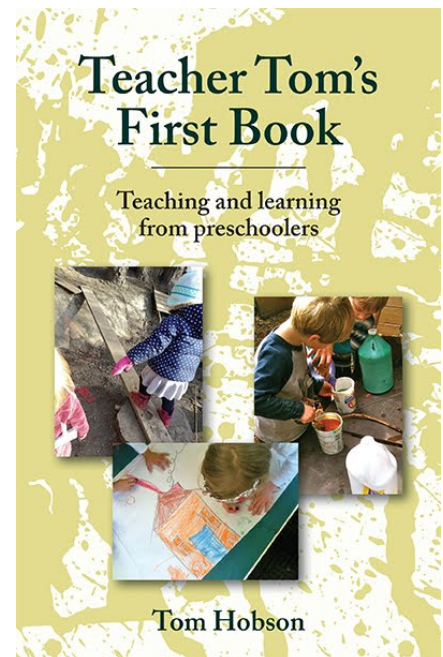
monday, september 21, 2015

Zero Tolerance

16



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By now I'm sure you've heard about [the Texas school boy,](#)

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Ahmed Mohamed, who was arrested when his teacher thought the homemade clock he brought to school looked like a bomb. From the start, it was obvious that they didn't really think it was a bomb. If they had really been thought that, they would have evacuated the school and called in a bomb squad, which they didn't. Instead, they sent the boy to the police station in a squad car with the suspected "bomb." The legal charges have been dropped, but the boy remains suspended from school on the grounds that he brought a fake bomb to school in accordance with their "zero tolerance" policy.

We also now all know that it hasn't turned out badly for Ahmed. His cause became both a social and regular media sensation, and he has now been invited to the White House, along with receiving dozens of other trips, honors, and gifts from people and institutions by way, I guess, of a societal apology.

Most victims of these zero tolerance policies, however, aren't so lucky. We've all heard stories of children who were sent home from school or otherwise disciplined for bringing toy weapons to school, even when said "weapon" was clearly a toy, just as Ahmed's clock was clearly not a bomb. One poor child even got in trouble for chewing his Pop Tart into a pistol shape.

And it's not just around guns and bombs that we have these abusive zero tolerance policies. Not long ago [an 11-year-old was suspended for a full year for bringing a maple leaf to school](#) in his backpack that his teachers mistook for a marijuana leaf. Even now, after they know it wasn't contraband, the boy remains suspended, due to a policy that treats even "imitation" drugs as drugs. According to reports, he has become withdrawn, anxious and depressed during his suspension, which, I would think, is a child's natural response to this sort of abuse.

Did Ahmed at some point joke that his clock was a bomb? Some are asserting that. Did the 11-year-old boast to a friend that his maple leaf was really marijuana? Those sure sounds like things a cocky kid might do. Do kids with plastic toy guns point them at friends and say, "Bang!"? No doubt. But in every one of these examples, the authorities knew, or at least should have known, that there was no real danger.



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Zero tolerance policies, especially when applied to children, lead to these sorts of Kafkaesque scenarios, most of which never make it to the news. They remove judgement from the mix and replace it with a [sort of institutionalized fear](#) which leads to this sort of abusive overreaction. The proper response in each of these cases should be, at worst, a scolding along the lines of, "Guns/bombs/drugs are nothing to joke about," not suspension or arrest. Better, of course, is to simply laugh at these attempts to imitate mature humor, pat them on the head and let them know they are loved.

It's time to end zero tolerance policies both in schools and in society as a whole. Children need the space to make mistakes without being subjected to these sorts of irrational punishments. Of course, this holds true for adults as well, but certainly we can find it in our hearts and in our heads to have at least some "tolerance" for children who are, by definition, going to make mistakes as they try to make sense of our society that both loves and hates violence, drugs and sex (I'm thinking here of the boy who was arrested for child pornography for taking nude photos of himself).

Part and parcel with this is the crazy notion that children can be tried "as adults" in a court of law or even incarcerated for the stupid crimes of their youth. The evidence is that this type of punitive approach to childhood is more likely to lead to a distrust of society and a hardening of criminal behavior, rather than the proverbial turning over of a new leaf, yet we continue to treat children intolerantly.

[Last week, the Seattle City Council agreed to vote on a policy that will ban the practice of incarcerating children.](#) It will likely pass unanimously. It saddens me that this is a cause for celebration.

It's time to set fear aside and replace it with common sense.

I put a lot of time and effort into this blog. If you'd like to support me please consider a small contribution to the cause. *Thank you!*

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about teacher tom



**Teacher Tom
Seattle,
Washington,
United States**

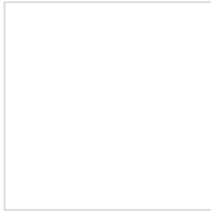
I am a preschool teacher, blogger, speaker, artist and the author of *Teacher Tom's First Book* (teachertomsfirstbook.com) For the past 15 years, I've taught preschool at the Woodland Park Cooperative School. The children come to us as 2-year-olds in diapers and leave as "sophisticated" 5-year-olds ready for kindergarten. The cooperative school model allows me to work very closely with families in a true community setting. I intend to teach at Woodland Park for the rest of my life. I love the kids and I love the families. It's an incredibly rewarding job.

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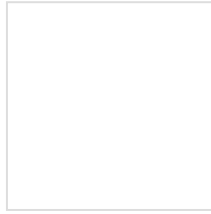
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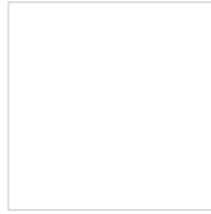
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Why I Teach The Way I Do



Why I Teach The Way I Do (Part Two)



A Part Of Our Lives

Linkwithin

posted by [teacher tom](#) at [6:23 am](#)

labels: [community](#), [rules](#)

4 comments:**anonymous said...**

Thank you for this thought provoking post! Such an important issue. We present these extreme double standards to children then punish them cruelly and alienate them from society when they make mistakes.

8:04 AM

anonymous said...

Thank you Teacher Tom. I had the privilege of hearing you speak in Nashville this past weekend. My co-teacher and I are happy to say we have put forth some of your practices already and our children love them! - As far as this post goes: Thank you. Thank you for speaking toward something that I personally find ridiculous, but our parents have been in an absolute uproar about. I wish I could allow my kids to play bad guys and good guys-> we did as children and to my knowledge none of us turned out to be criminals. My family believes in and works toward the day when no child will ever be placed in handcuffs, and it takes influential teachers like you to lead the way, so Thank You!

10:58 AM

anonymous said...

America is a very paranoid country.

2:54 PM

anonymous said...

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While seemingly unrelated, I found [this post by computer security blogger Bruce Schneier](#) on point. From his post:

Not only does trying to live in Yellowland [a state of "alertness" to threats or potential harm] harm you physically, it changes how you interact with your environment and it impairs your judgment. You forget what's normal and start seeing the enemy everywhere. Terrorism actually relies on this kind of reaction to succeed.

Here's an example from The Washington Post last year: "I was taking pictures of my daughters. A stranger thought I was exploiting them." A father wrote about his run-in with an off-duty DHS agent, who interpreted an innocent family photoshoot as something nefarious and proceeded to harass and lecture the family. That the parents were white and the daughters Asian added a racist element to the encounter.

At the time, people wrote about this as an example of worst-case thinking, saying that as a DHS agent, "he's paid to suspect the worst at all times and butt in." While, yes, it was a "disturbing reminder of how the mantra of 'see something, say something' has muddied the waters of what constitutes suspicious activity," I think there's a deeper story here. The agent is trying to live his life in Yellowland, and it caused him to see predators where there weren't any.

I call these "movie-plot threats," scenarios that would make great action movies but that are implausible in real life. Yellowland is filled with them.

10:38 AM

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