



July 3, 2012

Kids 'n' Dad Essay: How Do You Recognize A Criminal From A Father?

Most of us are able to relate to the parenting task that Jesse Sansone was happily fulfilling as he went to the family's neighborhood school to pick up his young children. He was unaware on that afternoon that he was entering the twilight zone; a place where the best of who he is (a dad) would be demeaned and marginalized.

This unwanted attention for Mr. Sansone and his family was prompted by a classroom drawing by his 4- year old daughter of her dad (in her own words) 'shooting bad guys and dragons' with a (toy) pistol. Dad would not be returning home at the normal time with his daughter's hand gently but securely tucked in his.

The involved authorities state unequivocally that they acted properly. The Record newspaper published a letter by local Executive Director Alison Scott of Family and Children's Services detailing their mandate and thus their justified intervention. The other participants, school officials and enforcement, offered explanations that employed a remarkably common language about their 'obligation' to follow the protocol and procedures for such a perceived threat.

In their rush to deniability these public bodies have conveniently blanked out the consequences for a bewildered father and family for the innocent drawing of a dad and child at play. These same authorities seem puzzled by the outrage. They somehow expected to be granted a pass because of the 'greater good' that they represent.

But to accept their rationale would be to accept that it is impossible to 1) protect our children; and 2) protect the rights of parent(s) at the same time. Those two goals are not incompatible and indeed should be the gold standard for this significant collaborative. Trust must be earned and never demanded as a given.

I was tempted after reading about the initial triggering event to call in the superhero dads of my parenting days; namely the intrepid Detective Donald (Duck) and the ever-earnest Papa Berenstain (Bear) for help. Unfortunately I fear that today Papa Berenstain would likely find himself at the end of a reckless endangerment allegation for his misadventures with his 'little ones' in search for the elusive honey pot.

According to several news reports the dad (Jesse Sansone) was unceremoniously taken into custody as he entered the school- part of his normal routine. Once in custody at the

police station *Mr. Sansone was required to remove his clothes for a full strip search and given a blanket to keep him warm overnight in his cell prior to an arraignment the next morning.*

Mr. Sansone's alleged crime- possession of an illegal firearm. The reality was very different. As stated earlier his daughter had simply described to the teacher in her own words that her dad was shooting 'bad guys and dragons' with a (toy) gun. The teacher informed their principal who was 'obligated' to involve the police and Family and Children's Services. The governing protocols and procedures were now in full play. Thank goodness her drawing did not include her father attired in a 'hoodie'.

At almost the same time the police and (FCS) Family and Children's Services worker(s) arrived at the family home to 'voluntarily' take Mr. Sansone's wife and children to the offices of F&CS for interviews and to execute a warrant granting police the right to search the Sansone home.

The mother was now likely separated from the questioning/interview of her frightened children by closed doors; the father was now separated from his frightened and bewildered family by a locked cell.

The father was processed by protocols employed by police similar to those involved in a domestic call. There is virtually no room for the police officer to use discretion based on their interviews- an officer is taking dad into custody. If Mr. Sansone had been incarcerated on a Fri. afternoon he would likely have found himself at Maplehurst Correctional Facility in Milton, in general population until his return for a Monday morning arraignment.

Ms. Scott (F&CS) defends her staff for adhering to the protocols that govern these matters and by their important mandate '*to investigate allegations or signs that a child under the age of 16 may be at risk of harm*'. Ms. Scott is rightly concerned that the reaction to this case could lead to outcomes where the public and teachers turn a blind eye to suspicious behaviors. That would be a shame!

I would suggest to these authorities though that the children were put at risk *once the existing, flawed protocol was applied*. Could any of these authorities be certain that their actions would not trigger serious, unintended outcomes?

In an interview following his unconditional release Mr. Sansone almost by accident asked a critical question: '*How do you recognize a criminal from a father?*' Would this incident have been a non-starter if the drawing had been of mom (playing) shooting dragons and bad guys with her daughter?

What does it tell us when every trained professional at every stage made the choice of criminal over a father at play? Has our community reached a place where the agencies entrusted to partner with parents to safeguard our children's welfare so readily accept and hold such a negative image of fathers?

Did any teacher express doubts at the family's school? Why was a reasonable explanation not initially considered likely or Mr. Sansone's explanation immediately explored? Is the *process so intimidating that it creates self-fulfilling outcomes for everyone involved?*

Why did the police not do a complete investigation at the school? Did the police have a social worker available at the school to interview the child immediately before the dad was taken away? Are there not additional steps in the protocol prior to the strip search, blanket and cell?

Why were the mother and children taken to F&CS? Why did they not do the interview in the parents' home? Was the mother automatically interviewed as a victim of domestic violence? Did the mother have legal representation? Did the questioning attempt to lead the mother to say bad things about her husband? How were the mother and family protected from any potential, over zealous tactics- remember that self-fulfilling thing? Is access to these interviews and notes readily available to families to ensure transparency?

A frightening thought is to consider where Mr. Sansone would be today if the police search failed to discover the actual toy pistol drawn by his daughter?

“ All parents have the right to be treated fairly and respectfully- without exception”.
(Alison Scott Executive Director Family and Children's Services Record Mar. 3, 2012)

Since schools, enforcement and Children Services work together on these protocols they must share responsibility for an approach that failed to meet the standard set by Ms. Scott in her passionate defense of her agency's work.

Take a moment and consider that what happened to Jesse Sansone and family *was by systemic design*. It is a set of procedures that has been followed consistently by these bodies.. Police Chief Torigian in the Record (June 5, 2012) has apologized for conducting a strip search (called a thorough search) as opposed to a less intrusive frisk search. He endorses every other action taken against this father and his family.

Reading between the lines- it is still unclear what is the strip search policy now and the Record 'kind of asks but chooses to leave alone' whether the current procedures by Waterloo Regional Police adheres to the ruling of the Supreme Court of Canada that requires reasonable and probable grounds.

Fathers are not a throwaway/disposable part of an intact or separated family. They are a key part of the parenting partnership that creates the best environment for their children and thus our community's children to become resilient and productive young adults who know that they are loved for a lifetime.

Mr. Sansone's question has not yet been answered by these agencies. How do you recognize a criminal from a father? Unfortunately it appears this question has little interest to those involved. That is perhaps the most worrisome aspect of this debacle

Fathers are not the enemy; kids and dad do go hand in hand!

Until that is professionally acknowledged in words and on-the ground protocols, I would suggest that every parent hide those crayons away and pray that your family is spared from the travesty that struck the Sansone family. Next time it could be...?

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