

DAILY NEWS

5-year-old boy handcuffed in school, taken to hospital for misbehaving

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A 5-year-old boy was handcuffed and hauled off to a psych ward for misbehaving in kindergarten - but the tot's parents say NYPD school safety agents are the ones who need their heads examined.

"He's 5 years old. He was scared to death," Dennis Rivera's mother, Jasmina Vasquez, told the Daily News. "You cannot imagine what it's done to him."

Dennis - who suffers from speech problems, asthma and attention deficit disorder - never went back to class at Public School 81 in Queens after the traumatic incident.

His mom and a school source said Dennis threw a tantrum inside the Ridgewood school at 11 a.m. on Jan. 17.

Dennis was taken to the principal's office, where he apparently knocked items off a desk.

Rather than calling the boy's parents, a school safety agent cuffed the boy's small hands behind his back using metal restraints, the school source said.

The agent and school officials then called an ambulance to take the tot to Elmhurst Hospital Center for a mental evaluation.

Vasquez was stunned when a guidance counselor called her at work to say her son was being taken to the psych ward.

Vasquez rushed to the school from her job as a patient representative at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan. On the way, she called Dennis' baby-sitter, who was closer to PS 81, and asked her to hurry over to the school.

When baby-sitter Sandy Ortiz arrived, Dennis was still handcuffed, she said. School safety agents also were holding his elbows even though the boy was calm, Ortiz said. Dennis is about 4-feet-3 and weighs 68 pounds.

"I hugged him. I said, 'OK, release the cuffs, I'm taking him,'" she recalled. "They told me, 'No, Miss. You're not taking him anywhere.'"

Ortiz routinely picks up Dennis from class. She said she's never seen him behave in a way that would require him to be restrained.

"I was so upset. There's no reason to handcuff a baby of 5 years old, traumatize him that way," she said.

The handcuffs were removed before Dennis was walked out of the school and driven by ambulance to Elmhurst Hospital Center. He was evaluated at the hospital and released about four hours later, his mom said.

School sources said Dennis had punched an assistant principal the day before he acted out in class. The sources also said he broke glass in an office door a week earlier.

A spokeswoman for the city Education Department declined to comment on why school safety agents needed to handcuff Dennis, saying the incident was under investigation.

The NYPD, which oversees school safety agents, also declined to discuss specifics. Deputy Police Commissioner Paul Browne said, "We hope common sense would prevail and we are looking at what happened."

Vasquez immediately withdrew Dennis from PS 81 and enrolled him in a private school, Grand Street Settlement.

"I asked him, 'Do you want to go back to that school?' He broke down in tears," Vasquez said. "He said, 'I don't want to go! I don't want to go!'"

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