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# A toy gun triggers overreaction

**A** mother's story... He still cries about it, mostly at night, when he appears at his mother's bedside and asks whether he can climb in. He still does not know, exactly, what he did wrong. At odd times he will hug his brother, sister and mother so tightly that it hurts. He is in therapy now.

"What has happened will affect him for the rest of his life," his mother said.

Her name is Paula. She is 38, and the director of purchasing for a long-term care facility. Every night she cries, too.

Her son is 10. He was arrested April 1 for playing police officer with a broken BB gun he had found in the gutter and took onto the playground of his Lafayette elementary school, long after classes were over.

It happened March 31.

This is Paula's side of it. Authorities will not discuss the case because it involves a juvenile; the same reason we will not use Paula's last name here — to shield the boy's identity.

He was playing with a friend a little after 5 p.m. at Alicia Sanchez Elementary School, which sits across the street from the apartment where Paula moved after her divorce about a year ago.

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# JOHNSON: Boy faces expulsion from school over toy gun

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Her son's friend had spotted the gun. It was a broken plastic Airsoft gun with soft plastic, yellow pellets inside.

Two boys on skateboards came over. They asked if it was a real gun. It is not real, Paula's boy told them. The boys rolled away on their skateboards and continued their play.

Paula could not believe it when the principal called her the next day. Police were on their way. Her son was being arrested.

"Mommy, please, no. Help me," he cried to her when the officer's handcuffs came out. It is the law, the officer told the woman when she protested.

"I'll get you out as soon as I can," she told her son. "You are going to have to be strong. We'll get through this."

It was a Friday. The boy was put in a juvenile detention center. There would be no bail because he was being held on two juvenile, felony-equivalent menacing charges. He would remain there until court on Monday.

Paula cried when she saw her boy being walked into court, handcuffed, a chain wrapped around his waist leading to shackles around his ankle.

"It screamed to me 'failed system,'" she recalled. "It was sickening. I mean, where were we? In a Third World nation?"

The judge set bail at \$2,000 but allowed the boy to be released into a probation program under which he must check in with an officer twice a day. He can never be without adult supervision.

Social-services workers seemed embarrassed when they arrived to do a check at Paula's home. They also went to the home of her ex-husband, a retired military man.

"We both demanded it, and we were cleared," Paula said.

It's her fault, she sometimes thinks. Other times she burns with anger and the worry that others will think she is a bad mother.

She did not know the rules, she said. Maybe she should have sat her son down, told him of the Columbine massacre that spawned the rules. Goodness, she told herself, he wasn't even born then.

Maybe the schools, too, should have educated the kids in their care, that if they bring even a squirt gun to school on a hot day, it means police and handcuffs.

Paula learned that one just the other day while waiting for her boy in court.

Her son has been suspended from school. Proceedings are underway to expel him. His father's sister, a teacher, is home-schooling the boy.

And so everyday he looks through the sliding glass door at the school playground and the kids playing on it, understanding nothing of why he cannot play, too — only that he cannot.

Yes, this is where we are now.

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COMING MONDAY

