

Law Jails Parents For Kid's Crime: 'Nanny State' Or A Lesson In Accountability?



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — October 10, 2017



Credit: Pixabay [1]

It seems, per usual, some bad apples are ruining it for the bunch in a Western New York town. As a result, the North Tonawanda Common Council unanimously passed a law that went into effect October 1st in an effort to hold parents accountable for their minor child's violations of city laws.

At most, parents can be fined \$250 or sentenced to 15 days in prison, or both. The decision is at the judge's discretion with the Mayor insisting a warning or small penalty could be applied instead of the maximum.

This parental liability law is in response to frustration over "juvenile violence" caused by some middle schoolers earlier in the year. Police Department Captain Karen Smith told [The Buffalo News](#) [2], "I can tell you that, back as the juvenile officer, this last spring and summer was the worst I had seen in the 19 years I've been there, with this core group of about five juvenile males who were getting in trouble on a real regular basis."

The leader of the pack "sucker-punched" another kid and wound up in family court, but the problems endured. So, [William T. Crago, the father of the victim](#) [2], co-founded with other parents the North Tonawanda Coalition for Safe Schools and Streets. He conveyed to the news outlet because of their minor status, nothing significant could be done and implied these kids know that too.

Officials hope this law will compel parents to rise to the occasion and take charge of their children. [Greg Woytila](#), [2] the school superintendent, says, "I'm all for it...When you've got 3,000-plus students and two or three are out of control, that's too many. One's too many. Sometimes the police officers are the only ones trying. The families have given up."

The latest resolution builds on a former law that allowed parents to be cited for curfew violations of their children. Though only a tiny handful of tickets have been handed out, warnings were acceptable. Legislation was expanded to include parents whose kids are bullying others or "hosts of rowdy parties." Though no arrests have taken place in Wisconsin, similar laws there set the precedent here.

Can criminalizing parents for a teenager's actions effect change? Possibly in the parent, but will it in the child? Since the law is already enacted, only time will tell.

Teenagers can be navel-gazers. It can be a normal part of development for them to test their limits, experiment, challenge authority and struggle seeing beyond themselves. Facing the consequences of their own actions is vital to establishing coping mechanisms and resilience. Hopefully, being held responsible for poor judgment or untoward actions has been a theme since early childhood since that tends to make adolescence a bit easier.

But, there is always a wide spectrum. And, extremes in this age group can pose quite challenging. What should a community do when bullying and the like harm other kids? Many argue such a legal intervention as this new law oversteps and extends the nanny state. While others think it's about time parents are held accountable. Some worry about the undue burden it might pose on working or single parents. Others suggest getting help from well-trained professionals would be a preferred method of sentencing.

Will the judge be the arbiter of defining what is or isn't bullying behavior? The example in this article reflects physical violence making the wrongful act pretty clear cut, but is it the judge's discretion to determine when other forms of abuse constitute bullying?

And yet others ask if you use the law to parent the parent, then what's next?

What do you think? Welcome hearing your thoughts in the comments section below this article.

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