

Schoolhouse Shock

Written by Alex Baer
Monday, 07 May 2012 17:57

You'd think electrically punishing children, as ways of getting their attention, would be outlawed by now in America -- but you would be wrong. You would have thought this would have come up before now -- and it has, over and over. And you know: The shocks still go on and on.

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My first nudge in the direction of the Judge Rotenberg Center, the JRC, came in an email today, asking for my support, on a petition at Change.org. It began:

"Hi, my name is Gregory Miller. I used to work at a school in Massachusetts named [the JRC] where we used powerfully painful electric shock devices (45-91 milliamps at 66 volts) on students to control their behaviors. These devices are much stronger than police stun guns (1-4 milliamps). Unlike stun guns, the electrodes most commonly used at school are spaced 3-4 inches apart so that the electrical volts passing through the flesh create the maximum amount of pain with those amps and volts.

"The United Nations is aware of JRC, has called these shocks at JRC 'torture,' and says that 'The prohibition of torture is absolute.'"

In his message, Miller asks people to watch a video of a student getting shocked. He then continues:

"Rather than shocking students for only severe behaviors, JRC also shocks students for minor behaviors, such as:

- Closing eyes for 15 seconds while sitting at the desk,
- Pulling apart a loose piece of thread,
- Tearing an empty used paper cup,
- Going to the bathroom in one's clothes after signing that they need to use the bathroom for two hours,
- Standing up and raising a hand to ask to go to the bathroom,

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- Blowing small bubbles in saliva between one's lips, and,

Shocking a non-verbal nearly blind girl with cerebral palsy for making a moaning sound and for attempts to hold a staff's hand (her attempts to communicate and to be loved)."

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I had to pause for a moment here. Maybe you, too.

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Mother Jones and other publications have carried articles about the JRC, since 2007 at least: Yes, five years has passed, and yes, the shocks have kept on for five years, too. The JRC is still in business. They are located, once again, not in Afghanistan or Iran, but in Canton, Massachusetts.

They bill themselves as a special needs school, servicing those as young as three on up to adults. Students come from various states and regions.

A snippet from the 2007 *Mother Jones* piece by Jennifer Gonnerman: "The Rotenberg Center, which has 900 employees and annual revenues exceeding \$56 million, charges \$220,000 a year for each student. States and school districts pick up the tab."

Taxpayer- and state-sponsored torture, happening out in the open, and to American children? Yes, and there's more, from that 2007 piece:

"The Rotenberg Center is the only facility in the country that disciplines students by shocking them, a form of punishment not inflicted on serial killers... or inmates incarcerated in U.S. jails

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and prisons. Over its 36-year history, six children have died in its care, prompting numerous lawsuits and government investigations."

Gonnerman continues, "Last year [2006] New York state investigators filed a blistering report that made the place sound like a high school version of Abu Ghraib. Yet the program continues to thrive -- in large part because no one except desperate parents, and a few state legislators, seem to care about what happens to the hundreds of kids who pass through its gates."

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A tangle of thoughts rush to mind about now. Here they are, spread out in no particular order:

- Signing online petitions usually creates mixed feelings in me, except now.
- Detailing in writing the ongoing insanity of this country hardly ever seems helpful or useful, except now.
- Most rants end up ricocheting around in a small cage, sermons preached to the choir, so to say -- I hope this one jumps that confining trend in a very major and unifying way.
- This is very "A Clockwork Orange" and "1984" too -- not just this story, but this era.
- The endlessly paraphrased adage echoes all around in my head, too -- the one that goes, "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing."
- And, another: *Just who in the hell are we anymore, here in America?*

I find these last three come up more and more, all the time.

<http://www.change.org/petitions/massachusetts-representatives-please-stop-painful-electric-shocks-on-students-at-jrc-in-massachusetts>

<http://www.arcmass.org/StateHousePolicy/RegulationandPolicyDebates/AversiveTherapy/MotherJonesSchoolofShock/tabid/729/Default.aspx>

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