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DAHLEEN GLANTON

Column: Pepper-spraying a 9-year-old girl should never be an option for police

By Dahleen Glanton
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The little girl seemed traumatized even before the police officers handcuffed her, threw her into the back seat of a squad car and attacked her with pepper spray.

When we [first saw the child on videotape](#), police officers were chasing her down a snow-covered block near her Rochester, N.Y., home.

Surely, they would catch her. She was just 9 years old, and they were grown men, trained to apprehend suspects at least twice her size and take them into custody.

She landed on the ground as the officers handcuffed her. Her hoodie rose to her stomach, exposing her bare midriff to the snow, as she struggled to break free.

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“I want my dad. I want my dad,” she screamed as the officers tried to pull her into the squad car.

“Wait. Can you please get this snow off me? It is cold,” she pleaded.



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“I’ll get the snow off you,” an officer said while pulling her arms. “You’ve had your chance.”

“Get in the car!” another officer yelled in a gruff voice. “Get in the car now!”

“I want my dad. I just want to see my dad,” the little girl cried. “Please, for the last time. I want my dad.”

They shoved her into the car.

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“Sit up, you’re acting like a child. Stop!” one officer said.

“I am a child,” she responded.

Police aren’t supposed to chase down little girls in the snow and toss them into the back of a squad car. Adults, especially police officers, are supposed to be their guardians, not the people who cause them harm.

[Column: A 9-year-old girl in Rochester, ill-trained police and the need in all cities for more community help]

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Members of Community Justice Initiative and others march Feb. 1, 2021, to protest the police handcuffing and using pepper spray on a 9-year-old girl last Friday in Rochester, N.Y. (Tina MacIntyre-Yee/Democrat & Chronicle)

To these police officers, the 9-year-old deserved no more empathy than if they were attempting to subdue a dangerous 30-year-old suspect. There was no compassion, kindness or mercy. But there was plenty of anger, impatience and cruelty.

It isn't entirely clear why authorities were called to the little girl's home last Friday afternoon. All we know is that it allegedly had something to do with a "potentially stolen vehicle."

When the officers arrived, the mother reportedly told them she feared her daughter might harm herself and others.

The little girl ran, and the officers took off after her.

The logical thing to do immediately would have been to determine if the little girl was in danger. Someone should have been curious enough to find out exactly what had happened inside that home. Someone should have questioned why the child was so agitated toward her mother. Someone should have wondered why she ran.

That's not to imply that the mother did anything wrong, but she did get into an argument with the child in front of the officers. Clearly, the child was distraught, and the mother had raised concerns about her daughter's mental state.

The officers should have treated the child as a potential victim, not a criminal.

But she was African American, and there are different rules for Black people, regardless of their age.

Columns are opinion content that reflect the views of the writers.

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A study by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality found that adults view Black girls as less innocent and more adultlike than their white peers, especially those between the ages of 5 and 14.

We have long known that's the case for Black boys, but until this data was released four years ago, it was easier to assume that girls, regardless of their race, were treated more delicately. We were sorely mistaken.

The general perception among whites, including law enforcement officials, is that Black girls need less nurturing, less protection, less support and less comfort in stressful situations.

All these things contribute to the disproportionate rates of punitive treatment for Black girls in the education and juvenile justice systems, according to the study.

This 9-year-old, wearing a black hoodie and multicolored leggings, was just a scared little girl, calling for her daddy. But the police officers, with a force that eventually grew to nine at the scene, decided that she was a threat.

With the city in an uproar over the incident, one officer has been suspended and two others have been placed on administrative leave. They deserve to be fired.

The scene in the first part of the video taken from police body cameras is disturbing enough. It is hard to imagine that it could get any worse, but it does. The police officers escalated it.

When a female officer arrived, there was hope that she might be more calming.

"I want my dad," the little girl told her.

"I will call him," the female officer said. "Sit back. They are losing their patience," referring to her fellow officers.

One of the male officers chimed in, "Dear, just stop for a second and take a deep breath. Hey, just stop."

The female officer reassured the child that she would get her dad for her, but the little girl was untrusting.

"No, you said you were going to pepper spray me. Don't. Please stop. No, please don't. Stop!"

The child screamed, and a male officer shouted, "Just spray her. Just spray her at this point."

And one of the officers did. It isn't clear which one, but a male officer said, "I got her, I got her."

"It's in my eyes, my eyes," the little girl screamed.

There is more scuffling, more yelling and more screams.

When the episode is over, a male officer mumbled, "Unbelievable."

No, sir, it is not unbelievable. What you did is reprehensible.

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