

Can Children Go to Jail?

by Anonymous

submitted by Cassandra Tondreau



Writing takes bravery. Writing about yourself takes another level of bravery, steeped in vulnerability. A friend and colleague approached me with this piece about their experience discussing their immigration status with children. I found the writing to be powerful, honest, and extremely vulnerable.

Immigration in the United States is as lauded as it is controversial. It touches everyone, whether indigenous, immigrant or descended from immigrants. Discussing immigrant experiences, historic and current, bad and good, is wildly important to our understanding of one another. The fears that go along with that experience are not to be overlooked, and play a big role in the writing of this piece. For this reason, I am submitting this work on behalf of the writer, who feels the need to remain anonymous. As we discussed the possibility of the piece being published, the writer said to me:

“I write to preserve my sanity and as a way of being unapologetically myself. And yet, I can’t bring my full self into expression due to fear of persecution. Because of the times we live in, I’m constantly navigating the duality of being disenfranchised as an immigrant and working to break a system that has silenced me. It’s with a heavy heart that I choose to hide my name, but not my voice.”

I hope that this piece is an inspiration to teachers everywhere.

— Cassandra Tondreau

The story I am about to tell is about sitting with discomfort. It is about being curious and having hope that things can change for the better. It is also about a collaborative thinking space, where ideas are shared and then taken into action. More importantly, this is a story about the power of being in a strong community, one that moves things forward.

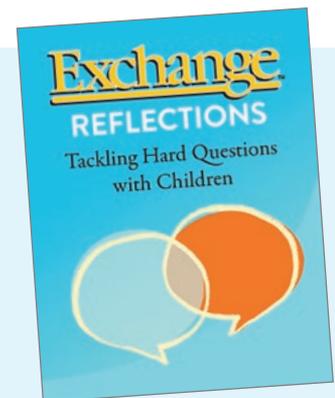
The author is an educator and healer living in Seattle. They hail from South America, and love sharing stories of their childhood with students.

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Part of my work as a teacher is to notice things. I notice children’s behaviors, their conversations, interactions, and how they build relationships. One thing I have noticed throughout my teaching years is how children are naturally curious around the things we adults have a challenging time wrapping our minds around. In this story, my students were curious about the “Whys” and “Hows” of the children living in detention centers. Part of this story is also how I slowly changed my reactive perspective around discomfort to a more responsive approach.

My students initiated the topic and I have to be honest with you, in the beginning of the conversation I felt helpless. I wondered how in the world I would be able to deliver a heartfelt yet age appropriate message to my

4-year-old students about children in the detention centers. Thinking back to when I first heard about this situation, I remember having strong feel-



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ings of anger and injustice permeating my thoughts. For me, it was an assault on human rights, right in our own backyard. I personally knew a couple of families who had to go through the process of being forced to be apart; they were never the same people after that. And I know many families that are still living in fear, not knowing if they are safe and if they will be living together in the near future. It is a terrible way of living and moving through the world.

Now, going back to the story. It all started at lunchtime. As usual, I sat at the table with a few students. Lunchtime is usually a time when we have conversations and practice storytelling of all sorts. On that particular day, children took turns telling a made up story about witches, knights and castles. At one point, one child was telling a story where the main theme was about a witch who “locks children up in jail.” The storyteller child pretended that his friends at the table were the children being held at the jail by the witch. That specific part of the story sparked a conversation among them:

John: “That’s not right! Children can’t go to jail! Not in real life!”

Ronnie: “Yes they can! There are children right now being separated from their families. Children *can* go to jail, right?” (She seemed slightly distressed when she looked at me).

My first reaction was, ‘Okay, great, now what?’ I was not sure of what to say. I was more than aware of the disgraceful situation that so many immigrant families were facing at the detention centers on our border with Mexico. My mind quickly jumped ahead to the children facing neglect, abandonment and being separated from their families on the account of war and famine across the globe. Those awful situations seemed to be happening so far away from my students’ lives, yet in my heart I knew I wanted them to feel

more connected to what is happening in the world, to try to understand what is going on for those children in those situations. In a sense, I wanted to have that connection too.

The reply to my students started by saying that some children are in places that look like jail. They are called detention centers: real life places where children do not have their families around, and sometimes do not have a friend or even a blanket to comfort them. They must feel lonely and scared. Following my comment, Ronnie had many questions around the conditions of those places and the reasons for why children are there. I noticed that Ronnie and some other children presented themselves with a level of anxiety around the “why” since they instantly asked me “Can *we* go to jail?”

I had to think a little bit on that one. Right away a picture of the U.S. map and their neighbors countries came to my mind.

I carefully said: “Well, I think that families born here, in the United States, would not have their children sent to detention centers. And that includes all of the children in our classroom. However, families born in different places, especially places close to the United States, might have that happen to them.”

Ronnie, knowing that I was born in a different country, asked me if that could happen to me. Before I could answer, Mary asked me if that could happen to her grandma too, who was born in a different country. Soon enough other children started flooding me with questions about relatives and friends they know were not born here.

My first reaction was to scream out loud “Look at what you have done!” not to my students or myself but to our political representatives! This messy situation that we find ourselves

in has repercussions they have little to no interest in dealing with, especially explanations about how they plan to do any reparations. Like many others, my students and I are left behind, trying to understand and pick up the pieces of a broken situation.

My own internal dialogue was paused by Ronnie restating the question: “So Maria, can you go to jail too?”

Me: “Well, I think if I was to go to jail because I did something wrong I would probably be sent back to my home country after going to jail here and I think I would not be able to come back to the United States.”

Children digested my comment slowly. So, I continued. “These children that we are talking about are in a different situation. They did not deserve to be placed in the detention centers in the first place. They did not deserve to feel scared or lonely. They did not do anything wrong.”

Ronnie: “Why? Do their moms and dads did something bad? So, like if you, Maria, if you did something bad you would have to go away like they did?”

That is a tricky one. As an immigrant myself I have been treated unfairly just because of the place I was born. It is a very complex theme to explain to 4-year-old children, but I wanted to be true to my words. I knew I was far away from being an expert on immigration regulations and I did not have the knowledge of the complex nuances of all the personal reasons that lead people to move away from their home country. So, I just thought about some of the reasons I knew were true to my own reasons to move away from my home country:

Me: “Some of these families just want to live here, to have a good life here. They want to feel happy and safe. Just like me, I wanted to move here to have

my own family and feel happy and safe. Safer than in my home country. And we all want to feel happy and safe, right? The problem is that we have people with a lot of power, very strong people saying that me and these other families do not belong here, that we need to go back to the countries where we were born, even though the United States is now our home too. So, the moms and dads are being separated from their children like you said, Ronnie. Their children cannot be sent back to their home country because they were born here. They need to stay somewhere, waiting, so the powerful people placed them at the detention centers."

Ronnie looked really upset, as well as the other children at our table who were following our conversation:

Ronnie: "That is horrible... Is the powerful people the president?"

Me: I agreed with a heavy heart. "Yes, it is."

Ronnie: "What can we do??"

Me: "What are you thinking about now?"

Ronnie: "Can we go visit them? I know, I think I want to like make them my children, like when you are in an orphanage and a grown up becomes your mom and dad."

Me: "Oh, are you thinking about adopting a child?"

Ronnie: "Yes. I want to adopt them when I grow up because I know I cannot do it right now."

Me: "Oh! Yes, that is one thought! Does anyone have another thought about what we can do to help them now?"

Mary: "I know! We could like demand that they open the jail and that they can go back to their families."

Ronnie: "No, Mary, we cannot do that remember? That is why the children are there."

Mary: "Oh yeah... Wait, can we visit them?"

Me: "I do not think we can visit them, but I know that a few people can. I know one person, he is a lawyer, and he was trying to help some of these families so he went there, to the detention centers to try to release the children."

Mary: "My uncle is a lawyer!! I will ask him to do that!!"

Me: "You do that! Lunchtime is over now but let's keep thinking of ways we can help these children, alright?"

Lunchtime was over, but that was only the beginning of the conversation. I knew I did not know how to continue the conversation, but I knew I needed to share this with my community. My next steps were reaching out to Ronnie's family to get a sense if any conversation has happened around the topic at their home and gathering more resources around children at detention centers.

Margie, Ronnie's mother, replied back right away:

Margie: "I do think that Ronnie heard us talking about this over the holiday weekend. When I asked her about it, though, she said she did not remember where she heard it or how she knew about it. When I talked to her about it after your email, she asked what we could do for the children. She suggested writing a letter to them, but then she wondered if it would be hard to get a letter to them. I suggested that we think more about it and that we could

talk more and that maybe she could also talk with you and my colleague that works with immigrants. I would be happy to support a plan for advocacy around this. Thanks for letting us know about the conversation so that we could follow up and help her think about how to engage with this difficult issue."

After Margie's email and debriefing with my co-teachers, then later with my admin team I started to feel more optimistic about making a plan to move forward with this advocacy piece. They have got my back and they were interested in knowing more about it, just like my students.

The plan slowly started to take shape. Margie did a lot of the heavy lifting by reaching out to her colleague who works with immigrants and by talking with the other families in my classroom. Here is the link with her ideas for advocacy: <http://bit.ly/39OoEPg>

The partnership with Ronnie's family and our extended community helped continue the understanding of the current immigration situation at the border and how the separation of children from their families might directly impact my students. To support this discussion, we used the following books: "Carmela Full of Wishes," "The Keeping Quilt" and "The Name Jar." At the same time, my team and I together with Ronnie and a few interested students decided to draw pictures and write messages to the children we were hoping to help, with the promise to be delivered by Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal. When the time came for the pictures and messages, children seemed to be hopeful:

Ronnie: "I hope this cheers them up!"

Susan: "I am gonna say I am a knight and I will bust them out of jail. And save them!"

Mary: “I think they will like this, I made rainbows and a cozy bed. And sun.”

We worked on the letters over the course of the next month and a half, from the beginning of the conversation at lunchtime to the time of the letters reached Ronnie’s mom. With the promise of the letters being delivered to the children, we were hopeful that some of our work would make an impact not only with our children and their families, but also with the children at the detention centers and their families. I have heard from other families in my classroom who made physical contributions to the places mentioned as well as continued the conversation at home.

Even though the conversation in my classroom around this theme has ended, the children’s experience of being people with agency, people who work through their fears and know they can act when something feels wrong is still relevant in many dimensions of their lives and my hope is that it will always be. And for me, when I look back at the beginning of my own process of having a reactive approach to my students’ curiosities, I see the fear partially driving my responses. As the conversation unfolded and my own thinking process met others, like my students and their families, I have found myself in a collaborative thinking space of not only resources, but also intent to do something about it. My children helped me to push past my own very real fears for my place in this country and taught me that we all need safety and comfort, starting with the simple words of acceptance from each other.

It might be just a tiny drop in a big ocean of ideas, but I like to think that with enough drops, we can turn the tide.

