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**The Kids Are Not Alright — Trouble With Law Enforcement Children**

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The West Coast town where I spent most of my law enforcement career was big enough to make the regional news most nights, but small enough to make it inevitable that I’d regularly run into exactly the kind of people a cop tries to avoid. Twice during my career, I stumbled across a fellow officer’s child committing a serious crime. The worst one involved a crash, an injured passenger and the chief’s intoxicated son running down the street.

And of course, that doesn’t include my own children and their questionable activities.

It’s an open secret in public safety that the children of police or corrections officers often end up on [the wrong side of the justice system](https://www.cordico.com/2020/07/31/5-reasons-first-responder-families-experience-more-anxiety/). As a naturally curious behavioral psychology major in college, I often wondered what it was that caused this generational divide regarding the law. Was it the type of person who was drawn to law enforcement as the parental figure? Do law enforcement parents push too hard? Require too much of their children? Reign tyrannically over the development of young boys in particular (although not exclusively)?

I can barely remember a month during my years of peer support when I didn’t have at least one coworker confessing their despair at a [child’s embarrassing, self-destructive behavior](https://www.police1.com/family/articles/how-children-of-police-officers-can-benefit-from-counseling-PTbvZXpihXHPdGYE/). One very close friend even had a daughter arrested for prostitution in his own jurisdiction. The stories were frightening and seemed ubiquitous. Not every police family had brushes with the law, but in my experience, there were significant numbers with at least one close family member having a local call history. Sometimes it was the spouse who was caught shoplifting. Other times it was a child who sold a stolen pill to a fellow student in school.

The sad reality is that many public safety families struggle to enforce the law on the street only to lose control of the battle at home. My son hates this story, but he probably won’t be reading this. It serves to highlight how difficult it is to raise children today.

**Talking Big**

I was working as a sergeant in Internal Affairs, or as it was being rebranded, Professional Standards. I received a call from the local middle school where my son was in seventh grade. The vice principal explained to me my son had been overheard bragging about having marijuana on campus. He’d been called to the office, where they searched his pockets and backpack, but hadn’t found any contraband.

The school didn’t have campus lockers and the administration was reasonably sure my son had made it all up to look tough in front of his classmates. He was telling other boys his age he could get marijuana from me, his mother, since I was a cop and had access to it. (Remember, this was years before California legalized marijuana.)

Hearing my idiot child had thrown down on my reputation, I immediately wanted to squash his attempt at middle school infamy and redeem my own professional credibility. How dare he use me and my job to look cool in front of some zit-faced, squeaky-voiced 12-year-olds?

Now, looking back, I think I may have overreacted. I was the only living parent the boy had. As a police officer and single mom, I tended to be stern and overly rigid. But I was going to teach him a lesson he would never forget.

I asked the vice principal to please hold my son in the office. I would be there in less than 10 minutes.

**Scaring Him Straight**

When I arrived at the school office, I asked to be given a private room to speak to my son. The vice principal showed me to the conference room and shut the door behind him as the three of us entered. That’s when things got real for an adolescent boy full of big talk and immaturity.

I proceeded to explain to him that if he wanted to act like a drug dealer, he would be treated like one. I then began a strip search of my own child — right there in the school’s administration building. The vice principal tried to stop me, but I was seeing red. I told the befuddled man he could stay or he could go, but I was the parent and entitled to handle my child as I saw fit. I was acting as his mother and not as a police officer. Luckily, I happened to be in plain clothes and had my lieutenant’s approval to go to the school in the first place.

In my mind, I was not going to allow my own son to be one of those kids I had heard other cops complain about. If I could impress upon him the magnitude of his actions and the consequences he could suffer as a result of poor choices at this early age, maybe I could get him back on the straight and narrow. Also, I might stand a chance of avoiding the snickers behind my back from other officers who would have to deal with my kid on later calls for service.

**Parenting Paradox**

So, how do you parent without creating a criminally rebellious child?

First of all, recognize most children are going to rebel on some level. Part of becoming independent is learning society’s boundaries and also handling the fallout of your chosen behaviors. Considering a child’s developmental status, the way a parent reacts is crucial. Parenting experts often emphasize consistent rules and age-appropriate consequences. They also point out the importance of calm, rational communication — even when your eyes cross and steam is pouring from your ears. Easier said than done. Yelling may get your child’s attention in the moment, but will they actually hear the message?

Family members have a special way of pushing each other’s buttons. The parent-child relationship is a perfect example. No one else can bring either party more hurt, anger, disappointment and fear … but also love, acceptance and belonging. Accepting that your child will make mistakes — and that they’re not always a reflection on you — is perhaps the hardest parenting lesson to learn.

When my children do well in life, I am proud and want everyone to know about their achievements. But when one makes a poor life decision, I take it personally and want to keep it as quiet as possible. Realize that every family has these secrets. Nobody’s life is scripted like a Hallmark made-for-TV movie. But the pain is worth the rewards and growth is possible when we learn from our mistakes.

**Law Enforcement Children**

As a former police officer with almost three decades of service, I feel comfortable giving a little [parenting advice](https://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/06-2019/parenting_policing.html) to those who might be just starting their careers (and their families) in law enforcement. First and foremost, set guidelines for behavior and stick to them. If a child knows the rules and the repercussions for violating them, this gives them the opportunity to consider whether they want to choose those actions. Forcing children to guess at what will actually make you mad enough to enforce a punishment leaves a child with uncertainty about whether they might possibly get away with doing something they were told not to do.

Think back to your own childhood. Were you ruled with an iron fist by a dictatorial parent? Did you ever act out, knowing what you were doing was going to land you in a heap of trouble? No one wants to feel like they cannot win. Too many ultimatums and narrow lanes to live in can leave kids feeling they have nowhere to go but over the lines. No one can be perfect. If you expect perfection from your children, you will be disappointed. Worse yet, your kids might just stop trying to live under your oppressive lording.

Finally, consider why a child might be misbehaving. When they were little and skipped naptime, we could easily blame the misbehavior on being over-tired and cranky. That gets harder as a child matures. Divorce in a family often breeds a rebellion that can be traced back to the exact same time the family was dissolving. It is hard to remember that cause when they skip school or run away from home. Still, when kids act out, it’s never a bad idea to ask yourself, “What else is going on in their lives?”

The [lack of control kids feel](https://www.cordico.com/2020/12/11/3-tips-on-helping-first-responder-kids-to-be-resilient-2/) in so many aspects of their own lives can be the root cause of negative actions. Choosing to vape, wearing clothes they have been forbidden to have, or sneaking secret meetings with love interests against the rules of the household can give a rapidly maturing child a feeling of control. Especially if the child was exposed to adverse childhood experiences, they can act out in severe ways to lessen the mental burden of trauma inflicted upon them from the outside. Consider all these possibilities before flying into a rage and rushing to humiliate your child at their place of work — their school — like I did.

**Internal Family Affairs**

It wasn’t until months after the middle-school mishap, as I laughed about the incident over happy hour cocktails with friends, when I really appreciated the absurdity of the situation. Predictably, my friends and colleagues howled with laughter and applauded my [no-nonsense approach to child rearing](https://www.police1.com/police-humor/articles/25-signs-youre-a-police-officers-kid-9iAhZseoKltQJJ9P/). They were incredulous at how bold I was to invade my own son’s personal space (not to mention trampling his trust), all for a stupid comment he made to boost his own middle-class street cred. As his mother, I had spent years as a motorcycle cop before getting promoted. For better or worse, that poor kid had spent his entire childhood living in the shadow of my chosen profession. He was trying to escape *my* reputation, not the other way around.

A few days after the incident, I asked him why he had told people he could get drugs to bring on campus. Just like you’d expect, he shrugged and looked at the ground. I am not sure he even knew why he did it. After apologizing for making him strip down to his bare behind in front of his vice principal, we discussed his lying and just how serious it could have been for both of us if the situation had gone any farther. I was ashamed for going too far in trying to keep him from becoming a criminal. Also, I worried I was emotionally scarring him, a little at a time. I resolved to do better.

My son is 21 now. He never got in trouble with the police again. That I know of. And I do not need to know about any close calls, thank you. He is still a bit of a ham in social settings and although he protests when someone asks me to tell this story, I kind of think he enjoys the attention. As silly as his actions were, I think we both know I came off looking just as ridiculous for how I reacted.

At least he can blame it on being 12 years old and in the seventh grade. I don’t have an excuse.

**Missy Morris** started in public safety as a juvenile probation worker after graduating from University of California Santa Barbara in 1991 with a degree in behavioral psychology. She moved to the San Francisco Bay Area to work in probation before quickly transitioning to police work. After serving three years with the Palo Alto and Mountain View police departments as a patrol officer, she spent the following 22 years of her 28-year career at the City of Roseville. Missy worked in critical incident negotiations, eventually becoming the multi-city team leader and serving seven years on the state board of hostage negotiators. Missy feels her greatest assignment was a five-year stint as a traffic motor officer riding a BMW and working fatal accidents. She held several special assignments before retiring in 2020 as a lieutenant. Missy now works with the Lexipol Professional Services Team, working closely with Cordico wellness solution.