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TASERING A YOUNGSTER IS WRONG, EXCEPT WHEN IT'S NOT

Should police have zapped a violent 12-year old?

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Word that a Hawthorne (Calif.) police officer zapped an autistic twelve-year old boy struck many observers as incomprehensible. Why did the cop have to resort to a weapon? Authorities say that the 5-7, 130 pound student grabbed a counselor and repeatedly punched a security guard, then kicked the officer who responded in the groin. When the youth ran away the cop Tasered him in the back. The darts came out in the emergency room.



There's little question that the kid was out of control. Had it been an adult we would have probably heard no more about it, but the fact of his youth and disability lends the event an undeniable gravity. As one might expect, his parents filed a legal claim, a prelude to a suit.

Policing is a fundamentally nasty business. People don't call the cops to feed them coffee and sweets, and by the time that authorities arrive things have often deteriorated to a point where gaining voluntary compliance is difficult if not impossible. Still, officers can't fight their way through their shifts, so most get pretty good at settling things without going to the mat. Salesmanship and a command presence are the two most important tools of a street cop's arsenal.

Sometimes talk isn't enough. For the first century years of American policing there was only one alternative to the gun: the club, an insufferably crude implement that brings officers in close, exactly where they'd rather not be. In the heat and confusion of battle batons can prove ineffective or, should a blow be misplaced, as deadly as a .44.

Belt-carried tear gas dispensers, the first effective less-than-lethal weapon, became popular in the 1980's. They were supplanted by pepper spray, a powerful irritant that forces the eyes to shut. Alas, in the rough-and-tumble of policing aerosols aren't always useful. For best effect the stream must strike the face, and preferably the temple, a trick that's hard to manage unless a target is motionless. And as the writer can personally attest (he was doused during training) pepper spray can seriously impair breathing. Although the National Institute of Justice determined that the

substance is safe when properly used, an [ACLU report](#) notes that it's been associated with respiratory failures and a number of deaths.

Enter the [Taser](#), a device that propels two darts up to thirty feet to deliver a powerful, temporarily disabling electrical shock. Simple to use and highly effective, it allows officers to instantly immobilize a moving target at a distance. Police throughout the world champion it as the tool of choice for dealing with combative persons. Studies in the U.S. have concluded that the Taser has reduced injuries to officers and citizens alike. A string of police shootings recently led [RAND](#) to recommend that NYPD, which issues Tasers to tactical units, consider deploying them to patrol officers, giving them a more effective alternative to deadly force than the pepper spray they already carry.

On the downside, Tasers have been linked to deaths by heart failure. Although most [medical studies](#) have cleared the device, significant concerns remain about the weapon's possible effect on the young, the old and those with heart conditions, particularly when repeated shocks are administered.

Regrettably, Tasers have a rocky history. They've been used when force was unnecessary, when less violent methods were available (an electrical jolt is nothing if not violent) and when stunning someone was otherwise inappropriate. Two years ago an [L.A. County Jail inmate was permanently disabled](#) when he was Tasered while standing on a top bunk and fell on his head. Last year a similar misuse led a naked, mentally ill New York City man to plunge to his death from a ledge. (In a tragic postscript, the commander who gave the order to use the Taser was so remorseful that [he subsequently committed suicide](#).)

No matter how "safe" Tasers might be, their use must be consistent with expectations of how police ought to behave in a democratic society. Still, it's important to keep in mind that officers work in an unpredictable environment. Those who lack a partner, as in Hawthorne, are in a particular fix. Tumbling on hard concrete with a beefy youngster can cause disabling injuries for both, while letting a child run off can put him and possibly others in harm's way. As it turned out, the youth wasn't hurt. Stopped in his tracks by the Taser, he didn't have the opportunity to hit anyone else, nor did he run across the street without looking and get struck by a car.

No doubt about it, using stun guns on children looks bad -- *very* bad. Appearances *are* important. Still, the real world is a messy place where not everything can be anticipated. Instituting flat-out prohibitions or dreaming up excessively complex rules runs the risk of paralyzing cops when decisive action is crucial. And that's not a risk that either the police or the public should lightly accept.