



Benjamin

Age: 7

Yr: 2012



Benjamin

Age: 10

Yr: 2015 (on a trip to England)

My name is Bambi VanWoert and I am a parent of a child who was restrained/secluded. My son's name is Benjamin Cook and he is 11 years old. First of all I would like you all to know that I asked him if it was okay that I shared his story and he agreed. This is his story and I wanted to protect his dignity.

I would like to thank Representative Price and the entire education committee for taking testimony on these bills. I am happy to see Andy Schor on this committee as part of my son's story happened in his District.

Benjamin's diagnosis include Autism, OCD and a host of other acronyms that just means he requires extra TLC and time to help him learn things. His behaviors have been and can be severe, I will not deny that. He requires specifically trained personnel to work with him and a list of accommodations that he needs to thrive. When those needs are not met, he communicates this by behaviors.

I will also state that I have not always been of the mind that seclusion and restraint should not be used. When I was new to this journey, I followed the example of the schools and the agencies that I was involved with. However, once we had Community Mental Health's involvement that I learned

Restraint started very young for my son, in Pre-K and Kindergarten. I was told the basket hold was used to calm him and that it worked. I was not given details about when it was used, I knew when it happened when Ben tried to replicate the same maneuver on his 3 year old sister and started asking questions. I was new to this journey so I didn't think anything of it, and thought this must be the way to go, and started using restraint at home.

At age 7, is when I really started questioning the use of restraint. Ben had been moved to a different school, and when Lansing School District closed his school (Elmhurst) and moved him to another school and into a classroom without an autism certified teacher. That started our downward spiral into the seclusion and restraint world. Once specific encounter of restraint, my son had bitten the inner thigh/groin area of a 6foot tall para-educator. That is when my research into rules about the use of restraint came into play. I could not understand how they could have my 7 year old son in such a position that he could bite that area of a man. I was not told of every restraint episode, in fact; when I was at a meeting with the school regarding this topic. I saw a book labeled "Ben Cook's incidents". The teacher was reading her personal notes from that book regarding the restraints that had been used and what led up to the use of restraint. When I asked for a copy of it, I was told that it was the teacher's personal records and not part of Ben's school records, therefore I was not allowed to have it. It was at that point I started researching further and at the next meeting, I brought the 2006 seclusion and restraint recommendations from the MDE, and I was told they were not requirements, they were recommendations.

We are going to skip forward a few years when seclusion started being used as part of his normal routine. From ages 8-10, I repeatedly advocated for a different strategy other than seclusion and restraint. We stopped using restraint as an option in the home in 2013 with really great results. At this point, Ben was in a different school with a different team, and was being put in a room with a cement floor, cinder block walls and a fluorescent light. He hated it, he was very vocal about not being in that room and started having nightmares about it and wouldn't walk down the same hall. We had repeated meetings about the use of this room; however the special education director of that district and the principal of that school, felt it would modify his behavior. Which, actually, the data proved that it escalated his behavior.

The most memorable date for me was December 10, 2014, when he was in the room for over an hour, he had defecated in the room, and then had tried to strangle himself with his pants. The team then wanted him to do a compliance task of cleaning up his bowel movement. I really lost my cool at this point, to which they responded with a letter trying to suspend him until he had a psychiatric evaluation and was cleared. This by itself, is absurd as my son's educational team regularly attended his Doctor's appointments. At this point, I pushed to end their use of S/R with him, and the results were disastrous and we are still working through the chaos that school's decisions created.

Benjamin is also on a host of medications, that include potential side effects such as an enlarged heart and breathing complications. To force him into a situation that causes a panic attack, puts his health at risk.

There are a few things I think are very important to consider regarding seclusion and restraint practices. We know that trauma changes the brain structure, and enlarges the amygdala. We also know, through MRI images that an enlarged amygdala increases negative behaviors because it exacerbates the fight or flight instinct. We know these are biological components beyond our control, and we can prove it through science. Why then, do we continue to use outdated and damaging practices for our most vulnerable children?

Finally, what message are we sending the other children that witness the transport of a child being forcibly moved to seclusion? When I question those practices, I was told that the other children are asked to look away to protect my son's dignity. I can hardly stomach the fact that this is the solution the school found. We are teaching another generation that those with disabilities are less than, and deserve to be treated this way.

Let me be clear, I understand that my son costs the state and the school district money. I do. But he deserves a life of dignity and respect. So before we resort to seclusion and restraint practices or police interventions, we need to fund our schools adequately enough that they can implement and train their staff in positive behavior interventions, to eliminate seclusion and restraint in our schools.

Again, I would like to thank the committee for allowing me to testify and I urge your support for this package of bills. I welcome any questions at this time.

Bambi VanWoert

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