

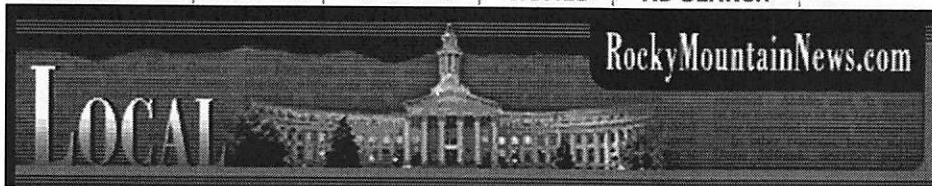
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Game lands boys in trouble

School punishes kids for pretend shooting

By Robert Sanchez, News Staff Writer
May 14, 2002

CENTENNIAL -- Charles Andrew remembers walking into Dry Creek Elementary School and finding his son alone in the foyer, sobbing and clutching a tissue.

Ten-year-old Connor got in trouble at school, and the boy was sure he would be punished. After all, the school's principal wanted his dad to pick him up early.

"He was just sitting there," Andrew, 42, said of his son, a fourth-grader. "I worried about what happened."

The incident and ensuing detention all stemmed from a playground game of army-and-aliens -- Connor and six other boys rolled on the ground and pretended to shoot creatures, using their fingers as pretend weapons.

At least one other student and a playground monitor thought the March 25 game displayed "violent and aggressive behavior," said Mary Terch, executive director of elementary education for Cherry Creek Schools. All seven boys were brought inside to meet with Principal Darci Mickle.

The game violated the school's zero-tolerance policy against violence, she told them. The students signed an agreement earlier in the year saying they would follow school safety rules.

They would have to be punished.

"Then Mickle asked my son if we had guns in our home," said Kristine Kinney, the mother of another student, Jorge Marquez, 10. "It's none of their business if we have a gun."

"These are good boys," she said. "My son gets detention and I have to tell him that he didn't do anything wrong. That's confusing for a

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child."

Mickle did not return a call seeking comment, but Terch confirmed that the principal asked the children whether their parents had firearms in their homes. The school acted appropriately, Terch said, adding that Mickle "had to discern the level of threat against students and staff."

"These students crossed the line," Terch said. "From what I heard, the play was very dramatic. They were rolling around . . . and it demonstrated a level of aggression."

But the boys' parents said the incident is an example of post-Columbine-zero-tolerance run amok. State law determines required expulsions for certain violations, such as when students bring weapons or firearm replicas to school.

Districts have leeway in other cases.

"I don't really see children pointing their fingers at aliens as being a gun issue," said Arnie Grossman, co-president of the gun-control group SAFE Colorado. "There's no real threat. All of us played cops and robbers when we were young."

All seven children missed recess for a week as part of their punishment. Andrew, a sales representative, said his son endured students' jokes and dirty looks. Connor asked to stay home from school.

"He was so upset, and we all know he's not a troublemaker," Andrew said. "I feel like I've lost control over the lessons I want to teach my son."

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