

Quieting students with tape not rare

■ Consequences are harsh for frustrated teachers who try this form of discipline.

By Gretchen Lacharite
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A recent spate of adults taping children's mouths shut came as a shock to many but not to teachers — or even a judge — who understand why some prefer to take their chances with the law in exchange for some peace and quiet.

None of them approves of the practice, mind you — especially in the case of a 2½-year-old pre-school student — but it's been around quite a while.

Ask Mike Griffin, 26, a teacher of Christian ethics at Bishop McNamara High School in Forestville. As a second-grader in Kirkwood, Mo., his teacher covered his mouth with extra-wide masking tape for talking in class.

As a teacher, Mr. Griffin said, he's never thought it right to tape a student's mouth shut. "But I do know that in some schools there is no discipline and teachers get that frustration," he said.

The consequences are harsh.

Fairfax County police pressed criminal charges against the pre-school teacher at an exclusive private school on Feb. 18. Maryam A. Setser, 29, of the 1200 block of Martha Custis Drive in Alexandria was also fired after school officials learned of the abuse in her classroom at the Congressional School of Virginia in Falls Church. Two school administrators were charged with misdemeanors in the matter.

A day later, David Allen Smith, 48, of Chantilly was charged with binding and gagging his fiancée's 8-year-old son for misbehaving in school, police said.

In December, two Hispanic students at the District's MacFarland

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Middle School accused Principal Roceal Duke, who is black, of taping their mouths and limbs with masking tape and parading one of them through the school cafeteria.

Seventh-graders Erik Chavez, 13, and Cristian Reyes, 12, said the principal put masking tape across their mouths and bound them with it for misbehaving in separate incidents in the second week of December.

The local cases are by no means unique:

- In 1989, a Jacksonville, Fla., judge had a 5-inch strip of tape put over the mouth of a 14-year-old who swore at the judge a month earlier when he ordered the teen held for 24 hours. When the judge added 41 days for contempt, the teen-ager responded with another obscenity.

- In February 1990, the Brighton, Colo., sheriff's office said a teacher who taped the mouth of an asthmatic fifth-grader for 20 minutes for talking in class did not break the law. But Kenneth Roberts, a 20-year veteran of the school district, was put on administrative leave for the incident.

- Last May, a Portland, Maine, teacher was reprimanded for taping a fourth-grader's mouth shut with thick masking tape for more than a half-hour after the boy talked out of turn in class.

- In October, Holly Hendricks, a Kissimmee, Fla., special-education teacher, was charged with aggravated child abuse for taping a first-grader's mouth shut, sealing him in a cardboard box for 10 minutes and threatening to throw him in the trash.

- In January, a Camden, N.J., grade school teacher was suspended with pay for disciplining a talkative second-grader by taping her mouth shut.

Why tape a child's mouth shut?

Fairfax County Federation of Teachers President Rick Nelson said educators face violent and disruptive students with no avenue for discipline other than to call an

administrator — which in some cases takes all day.

"Teachers don't have the power to discipline," he said.

It's a combination of stress, poor judgment and a low tolerance for misbehavior, said Lavdena Orr, director of the Division of Child Protection at Children's Hospital in the District.

"Children can push the buttons," said Dr. Orr. "But you have to be cautious how to react, so you don't hurt them."

In the latest Fairfax County case, police said Mr. Smith wound packing tape around the boy's wrists, ankles, calves and thighs and then taped his body to a board that reached from the youngster's feet to his chin. He laid the boy on his back and left the room, returning in 25 minutes, said Lt. Michael Fish.

The day after the Congressional School teacher was arrested for gagging the 2½-year-old boy, 200 angry parents showed up at the school to find out what was going on.

"The rule used to be that parents took the side of the teacher, now the norm is the parent takes the side of the student," Mr. Griffin said.

Mr. Nelson agreed that times have changed.

"Overall, one thing we've seen is a simple decline of respect that young people have for adults in a school setting. The perception is that they can be disrespectful to adults and get away with it," he said.

"There's no question the episodes of severe misconduct have increased," Mr. Nelson said.

"Student discipline standards have fallen dramatically in public school in the last 20 years," he said. "What is encouraging, there is a movement afoot in the country to restore standards for student conduct."

After learning that 65 percent of all students suspended from Fairfax County schools were repeat offenders, the teachers union asked the School Board to recommend increased punishment for subsequent offenses. Their findings are due this month.