Since the nineteenth century, developmental psychology has been moving away from the notion that children are nothing more or less than miniature adults. In suggesting that children need to learn to deal with adult levels of pressure, we risk doing them untold damage.

—Etta Kralovec and John Buell, *The End of Homework*

I’ll tell you what autism is. In 99 percent of the cases, it’s a brat who hasn’t been told to cut the act out. That’s what autism is. What do you mean they scream and they’re silent? They don’t have a father around to tell them, “Don’t act like a moron. You’ll get nowhere in life. Stop acting like a putz. Straighten up. Act like a man. Don’t sit there crying and screaming, idiot.”

—Conservative shock jock Michael Savage

How does an autistic, cognitively impaired 11-year-old end up charged with felony assault? Zakhqurey Price, who lives and schools in Arkansas with his family, learned on October 30, 2009, when, as his autism flared, two school staff members cornered and tried to subdue him, after which, the more he refused, law enforcement was summoned. The 11-year-old was afterward arrested, booked as a juvenile, charged with felony assault, and suspended for 12 school days.

For three months before the incident, Carole Reynolds, his grandmother, had continually requested an Individual Education Plan (IEP)—required by law—to assist Zach in school (IQ score: 68, reading level: 2nd grade) and allay behavioral concerns. She tried to get it right early on but was told to wait till school started. “We made requests to receive a copy of his evaluation/assessment results before the October 15th temporary placement IEP meeting and were refused because they said it was not allowed by state law,” Reynolds reported. Even after repeated requests “for a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), and positive behavior plan with positive behavior strategies,” Zach was denied Physical Therapy since, school administrators told her, he could “get around ... just fine.” And even with recommendation from a counseling center that Zach be provided a full-time aid, he never got one. At the October 15th meeting, “suggestions and guidelines were agreed upon but no formal positive behavior support plan was completed.” Two weeks later, the abusive incompetence ripened and bore fruit. And though his IEP rules out police intervention, Zach left school grounds in handcuffs.

This is a child caught in the crosshairs of a society content in criminalizing helpless children—so sick a society that mentally challenged children face prosecution for
being (essentially) challenged; also for failing to comply with orders even when all programs and assistance to foster rehabilitation have been denied them.

Zach was subsequently consigned by the district to homebound schooling for four hours weekly. While bound, he lost his “favorite sibling,” a three-year-old little sister. Justice!

The epigraph quote containing shock jock Michael Savage’s convictions say it all: that autism is an invention—made-up: merely the attention-seeking antics of bratty, moronic, idiotic kids refusing to act with dignity. Savage implored fathers—and, consequently, society—to thunder down on autistic kids: “Don’t act like a moron. You’ll get nowhere in life. Stop acting like a putz. Straighten up. Act like a man. Don’t sit there crying and screaming, idiot.” His prescription to cure autism must have delighted the Chicago police officer who slammed 15-year-old special-needs student Marshawn Pitts into the ground, right before punching out his face.

More and more working-class and middle-class youth and poor youth of color either find themselves with vastly diminishing opportunities or are fed into an ever-expanding system of disciplinary control that dehumanizes and criminalizes their behavior in multiple sites, extending from the home and school to the criminal justice system.5

Of this “hard war,” Zakhqurey Price and Marshawn Pitts can swap stories. More than indifference to the concerns of youth reduced to insignificance by racism and classism (or any of the other eternal vices), it demands callousness toward—indeed hatred of—young people who refuse to fall in line and do as told, for if Zakh and Marshawn had simply complied—cognitive impairment be damned!—their fates would have accounted much different. But long before stepping into school those separate days, both had “been cast into an ever-growing circle of group targeted through the rhetoric of war and terrorism.”6

In this respect, the 8 Afghanistan children executed late December 2009 by NATO forces can also sign off—from beyond. All enrolled in school, and ranging from 11 to 17 years of age, they were accused of manufacturing bombs for terrorists—a charge disputed by Afghan officials. “The deaths sparked protests across Afghanistan, with students in Jalalabad burning an effigy of Barack Obama and children in Kabul as young as 10 demanding that foreign forces should quit Afghanistan,” reported The Times of London.7

How do 8, doubtlessly innocent, children end up executed in a night-time raid based on inconclusive evidence?

The puzzle isn’t so hard to piece, really, for if we believe, as a society, that children, no matter how misled, can be redeemed, we would demand new practices and new policies to reflect this conviction. But if we remain convinced that each one, no matter how young, should be held responsible always, and that a set of strict, often inhumane, regulations must be instituted to contain and curtail all poor children (particularly those of color), then it makes sense to suspend 11-year-olds for carrying Tweety Bird key chains to schools, and to handcuff and haul out of class five-year-olds who throw tantrums, and to hand 45-day suspensions to five-year-olds for packing Cub Scouts camping tools to school; it makes sense to remain quiet as